Urban Representations: Cultural expression, identity and politics

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Edited by

Sylvia Kleinert and Grace Koch

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Contributors

Barbara Ashford is a social anthropologist whose main interests are economic anthropology and the social creation of value. Barbara gained her PhD in Anthropology in 2009 at The University of Queensland after submitting her study of an Aboriginal art dealership situated in Brisbane. She has also worked extensively in education as a teacher.

Vicki Couzens is a Keerray Wurrong woman from the Western district of Victoria. She has a partner, five daughters and seven grandchildren. In late 1999 she returned to her birthplace, her home Country — Warrnambool — after living in East Gippsland for the previous ten years. Art has been an integral part of her life, but until about 15 years ago she was more of a spectator than a participant. Although during her teens and early 20s she made sporadic ventures into the arts, it wasn't until her early 30s that she began working seriously exhibiting and performing. Her family has a strong connection to the arts. Her grandfather, Nicholas Couzens, was an exceptional artist, painting portraits, nudes and landscapes. Vicki believes he worked primarily in oils in the early to mid-1900s in and around the Port Campbell – Peterborough area. Uncle Stan Couzens became well known in his later years, taking up painting after his retirement. Aunty Zelda was a basket weaver extraordinaire. Several cousins and their children are also practising artists. Vicki's own children have all participated in arts programs/festivals and are artists in their own right, and she finds it interesting and exciting having so many of the family working in the arts. In 2008 a collective exhibition, *Ngathook mangoorroo watanoo…('I come from…'): The Couzens Family Exhibition*, was held at Melbourne Museum.

Lee Darroch is a proud Yorta Yorta, Mutti Mutti and Boon Wurrung woman. She has lived on Gragin (Raymond Island) with her partner, David, and two children, Ben and Zenzi, for the past 25 years. Lee runs her own arts business, Gurranyin Arts, and practises across a wide variety of art media, including basket weaving, possum skin cloak making, jewellery making, pastel drawings and painting. She is the part-time Program Coordinator for Banmirra Arts, an Aboriginal not-for-profit arts organisation. Lee has worked in community arts and community arts education as the Koori Arts Worker for East Gippsland Aboriginal Arts Corporation part-time for

the past ten years. She was a Director for Riverbark Arts Pty Ltd, a Koori arts and cultural company that she runs together with Treahna Hamm and Vicki Couzens. The three women, together with Amanda Reynolds, have written a book about possum skin cloaks entitled *Wrapped in a Possum Skin Cloak: The Tooloyn Koortakay Collection in the National Museum of Australia*. Lee's arts practice is informed by a strong philosophy of recreating and revitalising traditional arts practices. She has exhibited widely across Australia, Samoa, Japan, Italy and Greece. Lee's artwork can be found in many of the major public collections, including National Gallery of Australia, National Museum of Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Museum, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria and Koorie Heritage Trust.

Fran Edmonds received her PhD from The University of Melbourne in 2008. This was an exploration of the history of south-east Australian Aboriginal art and its connection to identity and wellbeing. She is currently a research fellow in the School of Culture and Communication at The University of Melbourne, where she is involved in researching the creative capacity of digital technology to support contemporary Aboriginal culture.

Sylvia Kleinert is an Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at the Australian National University. Until 2010 she was Associate Professor of Australian Indigenous Art at Charles Darwin University. During 1997–2003 she held an Australian Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship and a Research Fellowship in the Centre for Cross Cultural Research at the Australian National University. Working across art history and anthropology, her research addresses questions related to Indigenous art and culture. She has published both nationally and internationally on the Hermannsburg School, Aboriginal art in south-eastern Australia, Indigenous prison art, cultural tourism and cultural heritage. She is co-editor (with Margo Neale) of the major reference work *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* (2000). Other edited publications include as Coordinating Editor (with Djon Mundine and David McNeill), *Aboriginal Art in the Public Eye*, *Art Monthly* supplement 1992/3; *Symbolic Souvenirs*, special issue of *Tourism, Culture and Communication*, volumes 3/4, 1999/2000; editor (with Nicole Bearman and Ian Were), Louise Hamby and Diana Young, *Art on a String* (2003); and editor, *Crossing Cultures: Politics, identity and culture* (2006).

Grace Koch has a special interest in film, as one of her relatives was a film star in Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s. She has a background in ethnomusicology and audiovisual archiving, and has published both nationally and internationally in those fields. In 2008 The Hon. Peter Garrett appointed her to the inaugural Board of the National Film and Sound Archive. She has worked at AIATSIS for more than 30 years in the Audiovisual Archives, the Library and, presently, as Native Title Research and Access Officer. She has been a consultant with the Central Land Council for five land

claims under both the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cth) and the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth). Her most recent research has centred on how Federal Court judges and Aboriginal Land Commissioners have recognised the importance of song and ceremony as evidence in land claims.

Anthony Linden Jones is a musicologist, performer, composer of film scores and concert music, and Music Director of a community *a cappella* choir. He teaches music at the Eora Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Sydney and at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, and is a current PhD student at Sydney Conservatorium of Music, researching the representation of Aboriginality in Australian film music. In 2011 he held a Scholars and Artists in Residence fellowship with the National Film and Sound Archive in Canberra.

Dr Lisa Ruhanen is a Senior Lecturer and Postgraduate Coursework Program Coordinator at the School of Tourism, The University of Queensland. Her research interests include sustainable tourism, destination planning and Indigenous tourism with a focus on capacity development and entrepreneurship. She has co-ordinated a number of research projects for the Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre and undertaken projects for the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) on Australian outbound tourism and the Asia-Pacific labour market. Dr Ruhanen has published in a number of academic texts and books and was a major contributor to *Oceania: A tourism handbook* edited by Chris Cooper and CM Hall. She has close ties with UNWTO, having undertaken a secondment to the organisation's headquarters in Madrid as a Visiting Scholar in 2005. She now acts as a consultant for the UNWTO.TedQual certification program and is a member of the UNWTO Education and Science Council Steering Committee.

Suzanne Spunner is a PhD student at The University of Melbourne in the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation. She is researching the Kimberley artist Rover Thomas to secure his oeuvre. She is a playwright (*Not Still Lives*, *Running Up a Dress*, *The Ingkata's Wife*, *Dragged Screaming to Paradise*) and a writer on the performing and visual arts for *Meanjin, Art Monthly Australia, Real Time, Artlink* and *Eyeline*. She has had a long engagement with Aboriginal art, including a decade living in the Northern Territory, where she was on the board of the Northern Territory Centre for Contemporary Art, 24HR Art. She researched and wrote a manuscript (unpublished), LOOKING BOTH WAYS: Art since land rights (NT) 1976–2006, a survey of cross-cultural contemporary art in the Northern Territory made by Black and White artists since the proclamation in 1976 of the Land Rights Act.

Dr Michelle Whitford is a Senior Lecturer and Director of Teaching and Learning at the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Southern Cross University.

She has a Diploma of Arts (Dance) from the Victorian College of the Arts and gained 15 years of practical management and production experience in the Performing Arts. Dr Whitford has a Bachelor of Arts in Leisure Management with Honours (First Class) and a PhD from The University of Queensland. Her research focuses upon Indigenous tourism and public policy pertaining to events and tourism. Dr Whitford has published extensively in recent years and was the recipient of Best Overall Academic Paper Award at the Las Vegas International Hospitality and Convention Summit, runner-up Best Paper at the 2005 Council for Australian University Tourism and Hospitality Education Conference, and 2010 University of Tasmania Faculty of Business Award for Best Paper in Sport and Event Tourism.

Introduction

Sylvia Kleinert and Grace Koch

The chapters in this volume were presented as papers in the sessions on Representation and Cultural Expression at the 2009 AIATSIS National Indigenous Studies Conference 'Perspectives on Urban Life: Connections and reconnections'. The conference presentations by artists, academics and professionals in the broader art spectrum explored the significance of urban representations across a diverse field of cultural practice, including the visual and performing arts, music and film. As session convenors, we agreed to edit those papers submitted to AIATSIS for publication in the conference proceedings.

Our aim in bringing together these chapters is to contribute to new insights and critical analysis around the subject of urban representations. We hope that from this discussion key themes will emerge and connect to the chapters that follow.

Recent debate around the idea of urban representations has drawn attention to the problematic category 'urban' (Morphy 1998; Gibson 2008; McLean, I 2011a), yet there is often little recognition that the concern with urban representation and the politics of identity is a historical one coming to the fore in the late 1970s and early 1980s. At the time Aboriginal artists found the authenticity of both their identity and their work called into question. Today contemporary urban Aboriginal art is heralded for its challenging insights and yet the term 'urban' remains hotly contested and ambiguous. This publication offers an opportunity to reflect upon these critical debates from a perspective some three or four decades since the arrival of a contemporary urban Aboriginal art movement.

The diverse case studies of the present collection cover both historical and contemporary issues. It is therefore relevant to begin by examining the historical origins of the contemporary urban Aboriginal artistic movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Given the problematic meanings generated by the term 'urban', it is of particular importance to examine the usage of terminology by all the contributors. Specific terms such as 'remote/urban' and 'traditional/contemporary' are complicated and contested, so it is imperative to examine the historical debates around the use and meaning of these terms. And it is important to understand how the language used by

each contributor, and the variations in spelling and punctuation in recurring words, is indicative of the way that language is used for political and cultural purposes.

It is not within the scope of this publication to examine the work of individual artists. Rather we aim to show how ideas and debates have changed over time and to examine their contemporary relevance. In our discussion we also seek to highlight where critical successes for urban representations have been achieved and those areas where urban representations remain problematic.

Towards urban representations

The 1960s and 1970s marked a radical new era in Aboriginal politics. Changes in government policy associated with the Commonwealth referendum and the repeal of assimilation policies provided the impetus for the political mobilisation of Aborigines in regional and urban Australia. The origins of this political activism are found in the history of well-organised resistance in the form of walk-offs, strikes and petitions staged in the south-east since the late nineteenth century (Goodall 1996). Many people also took inspiration from the writings of Frantz Fanon and the Black and Red Power movements in North America (Beckett 1998; McLean, I 1994:104–07). Yorta Yorta artist Lin Onus, who played a leading role in these developments, described the new generation of artists: they 'broke upon the scene in the late 1960s. Many were young, many were articulate, but they were all angry. It is against this background that the art movement in these regions evolved' (Onus 1993:290). By the 1980s Aboriginality had become a key slogan for cultural pride as Aborigines across Australia united in political struggles for self-determination. The Aboriginal flag, which was designed by Luritja artist Harold Thomas in 1971 and flew above the Tent Embassy in 1972, represented a potent symbol of this new pan-Aboriginal historical consciousness.

Language as a cultural and political tool was pivotal to these Black protests. The term 'aboriginal,' for example, represented a potent weapon in colonial ideology. Art historian Ian McLean (2000:518) argues that it 'became one of a family of words such as "primitive", "savage" and "native" used interchangeably by European colonists to name indigenous peoples around the world without any acknowledgment of their own local and specific cultural differentiation'. Well aware of these associations, Aborigines understood that with the ironic inversion of originally derogatory labels words became assertions of cultural pride. By the 1980s Aboriginality became widely understood as a term for Aboriginal pride in cultural identity, both from Indigenous and wider Australian perspectives. From the 1930s onwards the word 'Aborigine' was increasingly capitalised to inculcate greater respect for Aboriginal culture.[1] For the same reason, the word 'Indigenous' is now capitalised when it refers specifically to Aboriginal Australians. Within this publication the capitalisation of terms such as 'Ancestors' and 'Country' by some authors is also a means of gaining respect and recognition.

In the southern capitals Aboriginal activism initially took the form of graffiti, political posters, poetry and demonstrations as a means of gaining attention for their cause (Sykes 2000; Hall 2000; Johnson 1990). Protest underpinned the National Black Theatre in Redfern with its 1971 production of *Basically Black*. Kevin Gilbert's *The Cherry Pickers* (1968) and Robert Merritt's *The Cake Man* (1975) were written while the authors were in prison. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dance Theatre's performance *Embassy*, based on the struggle between Indigenous protesters and police at the 1972 Tent Embassy, played to critical acclaim locally and overseas. Artists also transformed inner-city spaces through the collaborative production of murals. Fran Edmonds, in Chapter 1 of this volume, notes that murals 'symbolically and literally transformed urban spaces into locations that visually communicated a continuing Aboriginal presence'. Government policies shifted in response to this political activism. Whereas previously the policies of the Aboriginal Arts Board had focused primarily on northern Australia, with the appointment of Gary Foley as Director in 1984 the Aboriginal Arts Board began to reach 'out to artists working in Aboriginal communities across Australia' (Johnson 1990:21; see also Rowse 2000:516–17; McLean, I 2011a:56–7).

In the history of urban Aboriginal art the exhibition *Koori Art '84* at Artspace in Sydney has been identified as a landmark event (Johnson and Johnson 1984).[2] *Koori Art '84* juxtaposed the work of 25 urban-based artists alongside visiting artists from the Western Desert and Arnhem Land. Reflecting the identity politics of this era, the exhibition took the name Koori (formerly Koorie) — a collective term devised by Aboriginal people in south-eastern Australia. As Indigenous curator Margo Neale observes, the name Koori asserted 'a new political position of unity, of struggle, and of reclamation', in effect creating a 'self-assigned space separate from that allocated by the dominant culture as "Aboriginal"' (Neale 2000:268). Other groups adopted similar local words to assert their regional identity: Murris in Queensland, Nunga in South Australia and Nyungar in Western Australia. In the catalogue for *Koori Art '84*, Black activist Roberta (Bobbi) Sykes prophetically wrote that 'our artists — as an intrinsic component of the Black community — are engaged in a purposeful march towards the twenty-first century' (Sykes 1984:unpaginated). The word 'Black', which Sykes used, like the term 'Blak' later coined by Destiny Deacon to refer to herself and her art, ironically inverted originally derogatory labels to become assertions of cultural pride (Perkins 1994).

Despite these positive moves for self-determination, Aborigines in regional and urban Australia confronted a politics of recognition. In response to *Koori Art '84* some commentators denigrated the work as 'hybrid, amateurish…and "not really authentic Aboriginal art, looking more like second rate European art"'(Neale 2000:267). Similarly, members of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Ko-operative, established in 1987 by a group of young Sydney-based artists to provide an educational resource and exhibition space, 'were frustrated at the marginalisation of their work because

they were urban-based and regarded as outside the "traditional", and therefore "real" Aboriginal art' (Croft 1992–3:20; see also Perkins 2003:100). At the centre of these debates lie issues of authenticity. Anthropologist Annette Hamilton explains that discourses of race and culture in Australia distinguish between the positive image of 'real' Aborigines in northern Australia and the negative image of urban Aborigines who were widely presumed to have lost their culture (Hamilton 1990:21; see also Gibson 2008). Writing in 1981 Indigenous anthropologist Marcia Langton refuted the dichotomy of 'tribal' and 'detribalized' Aborigines (Langton 1981:17).[3] In place of colonial ideologies that assumed that Aborigines living in towns and cities were assimilated and therefore no longer authentically Aboriginal, Langton argued for the 'adaptive capacity' of urban Aboriginal culture with its own 'distinctive' and dynamic 'cultural histories…but a common "Aboriginality"' (Langton 1981:17).

Lin Onus, in his essay 'Language and lasers', commented on the 'considerable agitation' that existed around the categories 'urban' and 'traditional'; such binarisms, he argued, render Aboriginal art 'static' within a broader 'orthodox imperialist tradition' governing the European response to non-Western art (Onus 1990:15). The question of authenticity underpinned this debate. Authenticity implied the idea of cultural continuity associated with the purity of a 'primitive' other untouched by the impact of the modern world (Morphy 2008). During the 1980s and 1990s curators increasingly called into question the 'strictures of cultural authenticity' imposed on Aboriginal art. By the 1980s curators Hetti Perkins and Victoria Lynn argued that 'As a specific geographic reference removed from inferences of authenticity "urban" may be applicable. However "traditional" remains problematic implying as it does a perpetually unchanging civilisation' (Perkins and Lynn 1993:xi). Their selection of 11 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists revealed 'a healthy disregard for suspect dichotomies of "contemporary/traditional" and/or "in/authentic"' (Perkins 2003:103). Nevertheless, terms such as 'tradition' and 'urban' remain 'hotly contested' (McLean, I 2011a: 146).

Onus, like many other artists, including Tracey Moffatt and painter Gordon Bennett, explicitly rejected the tag of 'Aboriginal artist' and refused to be ghettoised by the static model imposed by the dominant culture (Williamson and Moffatt 1992; McLean, I and Bennett 1996:32–3). Photographer and filmmaker Tracey Moffatt, for example, explicitly made the point that she wanted her work to refer to and be understood on broader universal terms, outside the constraints imposed by the framework of Aboriginal art.[4] By adopting this position, Ian McLean (2011a:57) suggests that each of these artists 'in different ways, opened up fixed, essentialist concepts of identity to the flux of shared and mixed discourses'. Not everyone is in agreement however. For Indigenous curator Hetti Perkins, the idea of ghettoisation 'contains assimilationist overtones and is equivalent to imposing racist stereotypes' (Perkins 1994:5). Clearly, Aboriginality itself cannot be reduced to a single homogenous entity but is necessarily conflicted and contested.

As discussed, during the 1980s curators increasingly called into question the 'strictures of cultural authenticity' imposed on Aboriginal art. Initially, bark painters from Arnhem Land, who had struggled for many years to gain recognition as 'a *living* culture', won critical acclaim (Johnson 1990:20). Subsequently, the more recent development of acrylic 'dot' painting from Papunya in the Western Desert — initially received with the same scepticism as urban Aboriginal art — achieved recognition with the inclusion of three artists in the inaugural 1981 Australian Perspecta in Sydney. And the decision to include an urban Aboriginal artist, Jim Simon, in the prestigious 1986 Biennale of Sydney alongside Australian and international artists represented an important landmark.

With the selection of Kimberley artist Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls, the pioneering father of the urban Aboriginal art movement, as Australia's representatives in the 1990 Venice Biennale, it seemed to many people that urban Aboriginal art had come of age. And yet as Suzanne Spunner demonstrates in Chapter 5 in this volume, Rover Thomas depicted not just the country that he was familiar with and the mythological stories of his Gija ancestors but also its 'roads, bridges and other man-made landmarks', and Trevor Nickolls was concerned with 'the dialectic of modernity' between 'Dreamtime and machinetime'. As Spunner suggests, after Venice the categories of 'urban' and 'traditional' became largely redundant, subsumed within the broader and more inclusive perspective of contemporary Australian art.

Sites of Aboriginality

Since the 1990s debate has increasingly focused on the intercultural circulation of Aboriginal art as a commodity and its status as Aboriginal fine art. Anthropologist Fred Myers' study of acrylic painting in Western Desert culture marked a new direction in the critical analysis of Aboriginal art by examining the '*making* of meaning' for 'intercultural objects' and their interpellation within the available discourses and institutional regimes of the art world (Myers 2002:6). The anthropologist Howard Morphy contributed to these debates by examining the process of value creation for Aboriginal fine art (Morphy 2000, 2008). Value creation involves both the Aboriginal artists and their work in the process of cross-cultural exchange and the anthropological and art world systems that seek to keep Indigenous and non-Indigenous separated (Morphy 2008:26). In Chapter 2 Barbara Ashford examines the 'social practices and relations' employed by Michael Eather, Director of Fire-Works Gallery, Brisbane, in the process of value creation. She reveals that the reputation of the dealer enabled 'cultural differences' to be structured and manipulated and qualities of authenticity negotiated to challenge the 'exclusionary criteria' employed by the art world.

The multimedia artist Michael Riley produced films both as illustrative works supporting photographic exhibitions and standalone films dealing with social issues

in urban society for Aboriginal people, such as his film with Destiny Deacon, *I Don't Want To Be a Bludger* (1999).[5]

Australia's burgeoning film industry has played an important part in the formation of Australia's cultural narratives. Films express and implicitly shape national images and symbolic representations of cultural fictions in which ideas about Indigenous identity have been embedded (Rekhari 2007:1). In their essay in 1984, 'Racism and the representation of Aborigines in film', the film researchers and academics Catriona Moore and Stephen Muecke outlined two fairly strong strategies that have emerged in opposition to the (then) hegemony of current film-making practices in relation to representations of Aborigines. One involved a politics of abstention — handing over money and equipment to Aborigines to control the sounds and images 'independently'. The second involved Brechtian distanciation — the working through of problems of representation while in the process of the construction of alternative images (Moore and Muecke 1984:45).

In relation to the practice of abstention, Indigenous filmmakers have controlled the process of artistic creation, for example, by telling their stories using their own languages, both literally and figuratively, as well as embracing different concepts of the passage of time. Rolf de Heer, the director of the film *Ten Canoes* (2006), found himself 'directed' by the Yolŋu cast, thereby producing a film that differed from his original conception.

The second practice, using distanciation, requires a conscious overturning of cultural stereotypes within the medium of film, and films produced within an urban setting negotiate a portrayal of Indigenous people that recognises both their distinct identity and their connection within the urban mix of cultures. Works such as *Babakuieria* (1986) do this powerfully by reversing the dominant culture, making the point by humour and satire. The concept of Indigenous people being the 'other' as shown in film is moving towards a self-expression that has universality, allowing non-Indigenous viewers to identify with the humanity of the portrayal.

It is also the case that Aboriginal women artists in rural and urban Australia have been overlooked. Indigenous curator Hetti Perkins, who curated the Aboriginal Women's Exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1991, proposed two reasons for this neglect; first, the matter of gender and, second, the impact of Western cultural hierarchies. Perkins is of the opinion that, in particular, women artists working in urban settings have to confront 'misconceptions about what defines "Aboriginal art"' (Perkins 1991:8). In *Koori Art '84*, for instance, one-third of the artists were women and yet male artists have proportionately received a higher level of recognition. Most particularly, the association of Aboriginal women's cultural practices with the anonymous world of craft has delayed recognition. Recent studies have explored the way in which anthropological and art historical categories of art/artefact and art/craft have consistently defined Aboriginal art in European terms (Morphy 2008;

Thomas 1999; Phillips 1998).[6] The historical response to Aboriginal women's fibre and shellwork can be seen as an Australian parallel to Native American women's crafts studied by Ruth B Phillips (1998). In recent years the creative initiatives of Aboriginal women artists, assisted by women curators and anthropologists, have received recognition for Aboriginal women's distinctive cultural practices. Today the continuity of the shell necklaces made as body adornment by Aboriginal women in Tasmania, the decorative shellwork objects produced at La Perouse near Sydney and the distinctive fibre practices characteristic of the east are celebrated as contemporary Aboriginal art. Indicative of the shift in status is the inclusion of Ngarrindjeri artist Yvonne Koolmatrie's eel traps alongside the paintings of Utopia artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Waanyi artist Judy Watson in *Fluent*, the 1997 Venice Biennale. In this volume, in Chapter 3, Indigenous artists Vicki Couzens and Lee Darroch discuss their involvement in the cultural revival of possum skin cloaks traditional to the east. With perilously few remaining possum skin cloaks in existence, they relay the 'journey of healing' that is involved, 'reuniting people with possum skin cloaks, stories, culture and place'.

Recent studies in cultural discourse by Faye Ginsburg and Fred Myers suggest that Aboriginal art is a form of social action which contributes to social and cultural sustainability by reconnecting with the past and resignifying in a postcolonial world to imagine cultural futures (Ginsburg and Myers 2006). For example, parallels can be drawn between the production of collaborative murals in Melbourne and the extraordinary murals painted by senior men on the school walls at the Western Desert community of Papunya. Both represent an affirmation of cultural identity through the reappropriation of colonial space. Likewise, there is a long history of festivals and other forms of community events in Aboriginal Australia with parallels to Brisbane's Annual Sports and Cultural Festival, examined by Lisa Ruhanen and Michelle Whitford in Chapter 6. They testify to the importance of such projects in rebuilding the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people.

In recent years much has changed. Brenda Croft, in the catalogue of the 2007 *National Indigenous Art Triennial: Cultural warriors*, describes the participating artists as 'cultural bowerbirds, conversant in international art trends and influences; seasoned overseas travellers, undertaking countless residencies and participating in highly significant global events annually; and always on the move, yet always returning home, an amorphous place' (Croft 2007:xxi). At the same time ideas of Aboriginality have changed dramatically. In place of the identity politics of the 1970s, which viewed Aboriginality in terms of the radical opposition between Black and White, artists are concerned with exploring a more nuanced and subtle approach where identity is in flux and open to multiple interventions. As Marcia Langton points out, Aboriginality is 'a field of intersubjectivity that is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representations and interpretation' (Langton 1993:33). These shifts

reflect wider postcolonial concerns with a more complex and contested idea of identity. In a parallel development anthropologist Nicholas Thomas has similarly drawn attention to the 'entanglement' of cultures that occurs in cultural exchange where both colonised and colonisers are mutually involved in processes of accommodation, collaboration and appropriation — and both are changed in the process (Thomas 1991, 1999).

Anthropologists and art historians have indeed argued that Aboriginal art is so 'crossed-over with white discourses that they are difficult to distinguish from the other' — although this does not mean that they can be 'uncritically collapsed into a shared…postcolonial discourse' (McLean, I 1998:133; see also Morphy 1998:420). In the process these insights move away from Aboriginality narrowly defined in terms of identity politics toward a wider intercultural sphere of 'global indigeneity' that is both local and global (McLean, I 2002). Acknowledging this cosmopolitan aspect of Aboriginality — particularly in the cultural practice of artists such as Moffatt, Bennett, Wiradjuri artist Brook Andrew and Nyungar artist Dianne Jones — recognises 'the many influences — international and historical — in the works of Aboriginal artists' (Langton 2008:53; see also Riphagen 2011).

Urban representations: positive and problematic

On the basis of this brief overview, is it possible to see where critical successes for urban representation have been achieved? In little more than four or five decades Aboriginal art from rural and urban Australia — once radically marginalised — is now seen alongside art from remote Australia, critically acclaimed locally and overseas, and a focus of attention for both private and institutional collections. Contemporary urban Aboriginal artists feature as the subject of monographs and solo exhibitions and they are represented in prestigious national events such as the Sydney and Adelaide Biennales, the National Gallery of Australia's National Indigenous Triennale and the Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards. Like their colleagues in remote Australia, regional and urban Aboriginal artists are commissioned for major public installations such as Judy Watson's *Wurreka*, the zinc-etched wall at the entrance to Bunjilaka (the Aboriginal Centre at Museum Victoria), Fiona Foley's series of installations for Mackay's Bluewater Trail (2009) and Michael Riley and Judy Watson at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris (Museum Victoria 2000; Martin-Chew 2011; Perkins and Croft 2006). Contemporary artists from regional and urban Australia understand dominant discourses and are versatile in the use of mediums to produce work that is sophisticated and openly critical of the colonial regime. And urban Aboriginal art is no longer confined to the art arena but increasingly seen in wider contexts. For example, historian Maria Nugent, in *Captain Cook Was Here* (2009), considers both the colonial narratives of identity embodied in the historical figure of Captain Cook and the challenges to these foundational images by urban Aboriginal artists

such as Gordon Bennett, Daniel Boyd and Dianne Jones. In reworking these images to incorporate Aboriginal reinterpretations of history, these artists express 'the troubled psyche of the nation seeking to come to terms with its violent and confused past' (Nugent 2009:130).

Over the same period relationships between museums and Aboriginal people have come under challenge in relation to the politics of representation. Since the 1970s and 1980s the ethics of colonial museums — where previously artefacts stood as metonyms for the people themselves located in the distant past — have been challenged by Indigenous people. Influenced by Aboriginal protests and informed by the tenets of a 'new museology', radical shifts have taken place across many areas of institutional practice impacting on policies of collection and display, and on processes of repatriation and the implementation of cultural protocols (Simpson 1996). Most particularly, Indigenous curators have contributed towards recognition for urban Aboriginal art. For example, the Boomalli exhibitions *True Colours* (1994–95) and *Blakness: Blak City Culture!* (1994–95), which toured locally and overseas, challenged fixed and essentialising ideas of Aboriginality to assert the right to self-representation. Museums provide another model for exhibitions where communities work in collaboration with curators to reveal the history of Aboriginal Australia from a local perspective. Aboriginal-managed keeping places, such as Koorie Heritage Trust in Melbourne have also played a crucial role in the resurgence of Aboriginal art and identity. These radical shifts in institutional practice make possible processes of cultural revival (discussed by Vicki Couzens and Lee Darroch in Chapter 3) which involve artists in a complex process of community consultation with regard to cultural protocols and the transmission of oral history.

Aboriginal art is now protected by law. In the 1970s and 1980s Aboriginal Elders drew to the attention of the Australia Council for the Arts the illegal appropriation of Aboriginal designs. In so doing they opened up a campaign for the recognition of the intellectual property rights of Aboriginal people (Johnson 1996). Subsequently, Western copyright law was modified to protect the intellectual property rights of Aboriginal people. As a result, successful copyright prosecutions have taken place (Johnson 1996; Mellor and Janke 2001). Nevertheless, there remain longstanding issues of authenticity. Recent debates directed towards the tourist market have explored how an authenticity label might assist Indigenous artists from competition by off-shore, illegally produced products (Altman 2000). Meanwhile, the development of electronic and digital forms of reproduction pose additional problems for the protection of copyright in the visual and performing arts, film and music (see Anthony Linden Jones, Chapter 4).

Despite these achievements there are many areas where urban representations remain problematic. Today 75% of Aborigines live in urban areas of Australia (McLean, I 2011a:146). And yet scholarly and popular attention remains focused on Aboriginal art from remote Australia. Also, in media studies, a problematic distinction has arisen between tradition-oriented media and forms of urban Indigenous media,

with the former often being understood and valued as more culturally 'authentic' than the latter (Davis 2009).[7] The emphasis that anthropologists have continued to give to the continuity of tradition and ceremonial life in northern Australia is in part influenced by land rights legislation and the 'bundle of rights' approach to native title[8] but it is also the case that Aboriginality continues to be popularly understood in terms of traditional 'real' Aborigines, represented as a primitive 'Other' (Hinkson and Smith 2005).

For Aborigines in the southern 'settled' states, meanwhile, the effect and experience of these colonial categories can be internalised as a sense of loss that is expressed as a profound ambivalence (Gibson 2008). In theory, the category of contemporary Aboriginal art intervenes in the binarisms of traditional/remote and urban/settled. But as anthropologist Lorraine Gibson argues, Aborigines may find themselves equally marginalised by the need to validate a traditional culture and to be contemporary. Gibson's research with Barkindji living in the far-western New South Wales town of Wilcannia suggests that they are ambiguously placed between divisive models of Black and White difference at the local level and wider, more explicit public discourse where Aboriginal art is seen to be a representation of culture itself (Gibson 2008:297). Her research found that Barkindji — like many other cultural-language groups — reject tags like 'Koori', 'urban' and 'Black' and they emphasise their difference from city Aborigines (Gibson 2008:297, 308). These insights reveal the complexities and contradictions that continue to be sustained within urban representations.[9]

The further problem that arises is the critical response to urban representations. Critics frequently emphasise the 'oppositional' and 'politically challenging nature of the work' (Gibson 2008:309). But as Marcia Langton points out, this is to diminish the meanings of urban representations and 'slide over the sociality of "urban artists"' (Langton 1992/3:8); see also Gibson 2008).[10] As Suzanne Spunner demonstrates in Chapter 5, contemporary Aboriginal art could also be reprimitivised or 'othered'. In a recent review of Trevor Nickolls, Ian McLean persuasively demonstrates the cultural constructions that commentators place upon urban representations when they contrast the 'artistically crude and expressionistic' work of Nickolls with the 'conceptual rigour' of Gordon Bennett without taking into account the artist's own personal trajectory as a conceptual dialogue between Aboriginal art and European art (McLean, I 2011b:52).

Pivotal to the ongoing dilemmas posed by urban representations are discourses of race and culture that continue to call into question the cultural authenticity of city-based Aborigines. Dennis Foley (2000:47) argues that 'The process of questioning identity is an assimilation mechanism'. Similar research by Roberta Sykes (1986:86–8) reveals that Aboriginal identity (particularly in urban contexts) is being undermined and destroyed in the school place. Thus 'prescriptive notions of Aboriginality based on externally prescribed indicators continue to be used in an attempt to determine difference and disenfranchise the art practice and identities' of urban Aboriginal artists (Perkins 1994:5). For example, journalist Andrew Bolt's (2009) comment about

Dannie Mellor, winner of the 2009 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award — Australia's richest Indigenous art prize — that 'The Artist Needs Colouring In', 'forced the issue of authenticity along very personal lines' (O'Riordan 2009:31). Subsequently, a group of nine Aborigines successfully brought a class action against Bolt, who, in two articles published in the *Herald Sun*, was found to have breached Section 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) (Quinn 2011). Events such as these suggest to Indigenous journalist and radio broadcaster Daniel Browning (2010:22) that 'the politics of skin'— directly connected to the invisibility of whiteness — requires a more complex understanding of Aboriginality.

These insights suggest that the binaries of remote/urban and traditional/contemporary still prevail. Part of the problem lies in the failure to acknowledge the diversity of communities of Indigenous people living in rural and urban Australia and their distinctive histories of cultural practice (Perkins 1994:5). In some areas there is considerable recognition for this historical legacy, as in the drawings of the nineteenth-century artists William Barak and Tommy McRae (Sayers 1994) and the Nyungar legacy of Carrolup (Croft 2003). Meanwhile, the complex and diverse histories of cultural practice in the densely settled regions of Australia are frequently overlooked (Gibson 2008, 2011). Little attention is given, for example, to the historical impact of artists such as Albert Namatjira, Ronald Bull and Joe Rootsey from an earlier era of assimilation (Onus 1990; McLean, B 2011) and the involvement of Aboriginal artists in the production of souvenirs for the tourist trade as a means of economic and cultural survival (Nugent 2005). This is to argue that urban representations are the outcome of complex histories of colonial encounter and exchange.

The papers

In this publication we identify several key strands of thought connecting the chapters. One recurring theme examines processes of cultural revival and the assertion of Indigenous identity through collaborative effort. A second theme examines the role played by dealers and institutions in the creation of value for Aboriginal art and broader issues of copyright and appropriation. A third theme enumerates the importance of music as a driving force in film and how Indigenous directors have used it.

Chapter 1 by Fran Edmonds, 'Making murals, revealing histories: Murals as an assertion of Aboriginality in Melbourne's inner north', examines the collaborative production of large-scale murals in Melbourne's inner north in the 1980s as an assertion of Aboriginality. Importantly, Edmonds draws upon the research of Sabine Marschall and Margaret LaWare to show that mural-making in Melbourne resonates with the cultural practices adopted by indigenous people internationally. Edmonds' paper is situated in a period of political activism during the 1980s when land rights, coupled with self-determination and the Black Power movement, inspired young Aboriginal people to transform urban spaces into locations that visually communicated a continuing

Aboriginal presence. Through analysis of this action Edmonds argues that the murals represented a counter colonial action that protested the myth that Aborigines in south-eastern Australia had 'lost their culture' to reaffirm a dynamic Aboriginal presence in the city. Her paper highlights the conflict and tensions surrounding discourse on Aboriginality by creating a space for artists to articulate perspectives on their history and culture.

Barbara Ashford's 'Making a mark: Negotiations in the sale of Aboriginal art' examines the processes by which Aboriginal art is marketed in the commercial sector. She draws upon the writings of Alfred Gell, Stephen Gudeman and David Graebner to analyse the complex and shifting dialectic involved in value frameworks. Her paper focuses on the well-established Fire-Works Gallery in Brisbane and the role played by its director Michael Eather in the process of value creation. Ashford examines the social relations involved in a single exhibition, *Minimal Fuss* (2003), which featured three artists: Emily Kngwarreye and Minnie Pwerle from the Western Desert community of Utopia and non-Aboriginal artist Tony Tuckson. Specifically, Ashford examines the critical role played by the dealer as social agent in mediating categories of value for Aboriginal art. Ashford argues that while aesthetics and authenticity play a critical role, the particular practices undertaken in the marketing of Aboriginal art and the negotiation of culturally informed values reflect far more complex and contested representations than is usually assumed to be the case.

Chapter 3 by Vicki Couzens and Lee Darroch reflects upon their involvement in the recent cultural revival of possum skin cloaks. In south-east Australia possum skin cloaks are traditional garments that serve many purposes — both functional and symbolic — with their incised markings denoting individual and community identity (Reynolds 2005). Couzens and Darroch relay the cultural and spiritual 'journey of healing' involved in the revival of these cloaks. This process began in 1999 with the opportunity to view the two remaining cloaks held in the collection of Museum Victoria and their momentous decision to recreate the cloaks by working in collaboration with Elders in the relevant communities. Subsequently, Yorta Yorta artists Lee Darroch and Treahna Hamm and Gunditjmara artists Vicki and Debra Couzens worked collaboratively with 35 cultural language groups across Victoria to create the possum skin cloaks worn by Elders at the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne. As Couzens and Darroch explain, the revival of possum skin cloaks is now expanding to New South Wales and overseas in the process of reconnecting communities with historic incised cloaks held in international museums.

Examination of how music has been used by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous filmmakers forms the topic of Anthony Linden Jones' paper, 'Beyond the didjeridu: The representation of Aboriginality in the music of a selection of Australian films (1971 to 2002)'. After a brief discourse on representation and Indigenous identity, Linden Jones discusses how music functions in film. He moves on to compare how Hollywood and the Australian film industry have used music to depict indigenous

peoples, then analyses the music of five films in which Indigenous people either play major roles or are the focus of the film. Although Linden Jones examines only a small sample of films, he shows how the representation of Indigenous people through film scores is moving away from earlier stereotypes, such as the drone of the didjeridu, to a wider palette of sounds.

In Chapter 5, 'Neither dots nor bark: Positioning the urban artist', Suzanne Spunner explores the positioning of urban Aboriginal artists through an examination of the selection of Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls to represent Australia in the 1990 Venice Biennale. Spunner argues that the Venice Biennale was 'the hinge point' in a critical decade in which 'category panic' pervaded the art world in response to the spare ochre landscapes of Kimberley artist Rover Thomas and the Dreamtime/machinetime imagery of Trevor Nickolls, the 'founding father' of urban Aboriginal art. In her detailed analysis, Spunner examines the complex role played by a loose coalition of art advisors, curators and writers who set the scene for the 1990 Venice Biennale through a series of forums, reviews, publications and exhibitions. In the process Aboriginal art became redefined as contemporary Aboriginal art from Australia.

Within Indigenous Australia festivals are a well-established means of connecting communities through the inclusion of a range of activities, including art, storytelling, dance and community gatherings, sport and tourism. In Chapter 6 Lisa Ruhanen and Michelle Whitford examine Brisbane's Annual Sports and Cultural Festival, which was established in 1992 by First Contact Inc. While the festival incorporates a range of Indigenous musical and cultural entertainers, its primary focus is a Rugby League touch football sporting tournament. Since its inception the festival has grown from a small, local community 'get together' to become a successful sports and cultural festival, with growing numbers of participants and spectators from Brisbane and interstate. Ruhanen and Whitford point out the many socio-cultural and economic benefits that accrue from the festival in the form of community celebration, cultural rejuvenation, tourist activity and economic gains.

Conclusion

In the 1960s Aborigines in the 'settled' southern part of the continent were radically marginalised by contrast with more 'traditional' Aborigines living in northern Australia. This was the result of not just the violent history of colonial dispossession but also existing discourses of race and culture about Aborigines. Over the past four or five decades this situation has been redressed and today the work of Aboriginal artists across Australia is critically acclaimed as contemporary Indigenous art. Crucial to this success is the challenge to the assumptions about 'urban' and 'traditional' that governed the response to Aboriginal art. Located at the intersection of past, present and future, 'urban' artists draw inspiration from their cultural heritage and they bear witness to the shared experience of colonisation by making use of both Aboriginal

and European conventions. In the meantime, ideas of Aboriginality have shifted dramatically from the identity politics of the 1960s and 1970s, where cultural identity was viewed in terms of the radical opposition between Black and White, to a wider intercultural sphere of 'global indigeneity'.

And yet, despite these positive moves, the idea of urban representations remains problematic. Like Aboriginality itself, the idea of urban representations is fraught with contradictions and complexities expressive of the ambiguous place of Aborigines within the nation state. The interpretive frameworks through which the work of 'urban' Aboriginal artists is understood, the political activism in which artists are engaged and the continued questioning of identity are indicative of the wider social relations that prevail.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. In the late 1930s the anthropologist AP Elkin advocated the capitalising of 'Aboriginal' to increase respect for Aboriginal people. The term 'Aboriginality' is thought to have been first used by radical members of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League agitating for Indigenous control over the organisation (McLean, I 2000, pp.518–9).

2. Many exhibitions at this time helped raise the profile of urban Aboriginal art: the *Contemporary Aboriginal Art Exhibition* at the Bondi Pavilion Sydney (1983); *Heartland* (1985) at Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, which exhibited Aboriginal women's art; *Urban Koories* (1985) at the Aboriginal Artists Gallery in Sydney and Melbourne; and *NADOC '86*, which focused on Aboriginal photographers.

3. Langton and others attributed such racial terminology to the discriminatory and oppressive legislation enacted against Aboriginal people in the late nineteenth century and to the approach adopted by Australian anthropology, which focused primarily on traditional Aborigines living in remote communities while at the same time adopting social scientists' 'culture of poverty' approach for the south-east (Langton 1981; Cowlishaw and Gibson 2012; Hinkson and Smith 2005).

4. In discussion with curator Claire Williamson in relation to the exhibition *Who Do You Take Me For?* at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane, Tracey Moffatt made the point that 'The reason why I have been successful is that I have avoided allowing myself to be ghettoised as a BLACK ARTIST' (Williamson and Moffatt 1992:6).

5. For a commentary on this and other works of Michael Riley, see the web page on the 2006 exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia 'Michael Riley, Sights Unseen', <http://nga.gov.au/Exhibition/Riley/Default.cfm?MnuID=2&GalID=7>.

6. Morphy (2008:12) persuasively argues that 'Art as a category is deeply entangled in value creation processes. Since the eighteenth century, the category of fine art has been used to exclude recognition for other forms.'

7. On this problem, see Frances Peters-Little's (2001) brilliant analysis, 'Nobles and savages: Enduring features in television documentaries'. Also see her book *Return of the Noble Savage: Reflections of an Australian Aboriginal filmmaker* (Peters-Little 2009).

8. The latest practice directions issued by the Federal Court of Australia (2011) make provision for evidence to be presented in the form of song and ceremonies for native title claims.

9. In response to this dilemma Gillian Cowlishaw and Lorraine Gibson call for 'an Australia-wide anthropology' that 'moves away from an exclusive concern with

Indigenous exceptionalism' to examine the fresh perspectives offered by rural and urban representations (Cowlishaw and Gibson 2012:6).

10. For example, the 1988 *Dreamings* exhibition at the Asia Society Galleries in New York, which gained international recognition for Western Desert acrylic painting, did not include 'urban' Aboriginal art, although the catalogue did. Myers argues that the curator Andrew Pekarik wanted 'a *safe* way to incorporate Aboriginality' without the 'pain' and angst associated with urban Aboriginal art (Myers 2002:242; see also Gibson 2011:122). Nevertheless, this bias towards Aboriginal art from remote communities serves to reinforce the spiritual content of 'traditional' Aboriginal art and its connection with the Dreaming.

Chapter 1

Making murals, revealing histories: Murals as an assertion of Aboriginality in Melbourne's inner north

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Abstract: *Since the early 1980s, Aboriginal artists across the inner-northern suburbs of Melbourne have been creating large-scale, vibrantly painted murals that deliver political and social commentaries concerning Aboriginal histories. While the images are distinctly Aboriginal, portraying universal themes relating to the dispossession of Aboriginal people from their lands and their survival across the nation, they are also representations of specific stories and events that affect Aboriginal people in the south-east. The murals provide alternative approaches for Aboriginal people in the area to assert their Aboriginality and provide a visual language for 're-membering' history from an Aboriginal perspective. They are assertions of a continuing Aboriginal presence in the area, simultaneously contributing to the process of culture-making — where representations of Aboriginality are positioned as modern, urban, contemporary and authentic — and contesting ideas of Aboriginality as being fixed in another time and place. Further, the capacity for murals to provide avenues to support cross-cultural dialogues between diverse groups encourages greater understandings of the continuing effects of colonisation on Aboriginal people today. While many Aboriginal people in the inner north continue to be marginalised, participation in the creation of the murals provides a means to engage in processes that reclaim culture and enhance the wellbeing of the Aboriginal community in the south-east.*

Introduction

In the 1980s, in Melbourne's inner-northern suburbs, large-scale mural production by young Aboriginal people symbolically and literally transformed urban spaces into locations that visually communicated a continuing Aboriginal presence. These

artworks contested the myths of south-east Aboriginal culture as obsolete, highlighting this paradox, as well as tensions surrounding notions of authentic Aboriginality in the region. Mural-making provided a space for Aboriginal artists to articulate perspectives on their history and culture, revealing a 'hidden history' through their artwork, while responding to the socio-political climate of the time (see Attwood 2005).

In this paper I discuss several Melbourne Aboriginal mural projects, concentrating on the development of mural art from 1983 until today, and their significance to Aboriginal 'culture-making' in the south-east as a means for negotiating and demonstrating Aboriginal identities and histories (Myers 1994; Myers 2002:361). The making of murals in Melbourne's inner north reveals the continuing presence of Aboriginal people in an area that has for more than 70 years been at the centre of Aboriginal socio-cultural and political developments in Victoria (Broome 2005).

These murals also represent various trajectories in political and social attitudes that have impacted on Aboriginal society for the past 30 years. Mural-making, from the 1980s until the early 1990s, responded to campaigns that arose during the 1960s and 1970s, including the Black Power movement of the 1960s, as well as the 1967 referendum.[1] Aboriginal political agendas included an articulation of the politics of identity, self-determination, community control of organisations, the pursuit of sovereignty and the recognition of land rights (Anderson, I 2008). These concerns were 're-presented'[2] in murals such as the Northcote Koorie[3] Mural (1983–84) and the original Victorian Aboriginal Health Service murals (1984–85) by groups of young south-eastern Aboriginal artists, including the Gunditjmara artist the late Les Griggs, Gunnai artist Ray Thomas, Yorta Yorta artist Lyn Thorpe and Yorta Yorta/Wiradjuri artist Lyn Briggs.

In the early 1990s political activists advocated for reconciliation and social justice initiatives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These eventuated in the report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, the rejection of the fiction of terra nullius in the Mabo decision, and the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth).[4] Murals such as the new Victorian Aboriginal Health Service floor mural (1992) (designed by Lyn Thorpe and Lyn Briggs) depicted images that responded to these political initiatives, illustrating cultural continuity through connection to and the significance of Country and kin for south-eastern Aboriginal people.

In the new millennium Aboriginal murals reveal a growing awareness of the benefits of cross-cultural exchange. This resonates with the 'traditional' south-eastern Aboriginal concept of *Tanderrum* (the sharing and exchange of information with outsiders) (see Barwick et al. 1998). These endeavours recognise the importance of outside organisations working with and in the Aboriginal community in Melbourne's inner north to achieve positive, long-term and relevant outcomes. Such initiatives are revealed by the murals painted at the Hoddle Street public housing flats in Collingwood by BEEM artists (a collective of local Aboriginal people, many of whom are homeless). These murals and the artists involved in the project have opened a dialogue between

cultures to reveal the capacity of diverse groups to work together in an attempt to strengthen social justice and equality for minority communities.

Recently, street-art by the Aboriginal graffiti/stencil artist Reko Rennie (Gamilaroi/Kamilaroi) also comments on current political concerns, highlighting the possibility of reconnecting to culture using traditional designs in contemporary ways. Additionally, Rennie's work contests the historical boundaries between low and high art, reflecting the multiple possibilities of art to engage people on different levels.

The murals discussed here represent Indigenous narratives of dispossession, injustice, survival, connections to Country, exchange, and a reinvigoration and understanding of south-east cultural heritage from a contemporary Aboriginal perspective. Aboriginal mural designs in Melbourne are making the unseen visible on a grand scale. The murals provide artists with a means of acting individually or collectively to reclaim culture and identity in new and dynamic ways, where both are revealed as something that is 'slowly but surely…re-imagin[ed]', made and remade through a continuing dialogue and exploration of the past, present and future (Ginsburg and Myers 2006:30; cf. Langton 1993; Kleinert 2010).

Murals as a response to discrimination

In south-east Australia murals highlight issues of discrimination, challenging dominant perceptions of Aboriginality and affirming an authentic contemporary Aboriginal presence in the region. Although some of the murals in Melbourne's inner north have been viewed as evidence of the overtly politicised nature of urban-based Aboriginal people (Leslie 2008; Neale 2000b), their development can also be seen in relation to large-scale murals constructed internationally in the late twentieth century by other marginalised communities. While the creation of murals by other groups reflects their own histories of discrimination and are culturally specific, there remain similarities between them. As the German art historian Sabine Marschall (2002:45) writes following her work in relation to South African mural art, 'Mural movements tended to emerge in periods of political or socio economic upheaval; they were closely associated with the desire for change'. Similarly, the American academic and mural researcher Margaret LaWare (1998) also found that murals enabled members of the Mexican American (Chicanas/os) community to reconnect with their heritage by adopting powerful images that relate stories of a people forced to flee their homelands and as assertions of their identity.[5]

Images portrayed in murals internationally, like those in south-east Australian Aboriginal murals, support positive approaches to community development. As collaborative projects, these murals reinforce the unique identities of the artists and their communities. LaWare argues that they facilitate a 'visual epideictic relation' or a visual rhetoric, a communication through images. This encourages avenues for bringing minority communities together through familiar visual representations.

These allow people to realise their stories as assertions of identity and connections to place, as well as supporting a 'rhetoric of difference'. Thus, murals serve a celebratory function creating a visual language between the mural and the audience, reinforcing a sense of pride among people who have a shared cultural heritage and 'making visible the previously invisible'. Through visual images, 'community-based murals present an image of community that resists marginalization and reverses internalized prejudices' (LaWare 1998:144). The images operate on a number of levels, enabling individuals from marginalised groups to 'feel connected and empowered by an ethnically and politically defined community' (LaWare 1998:144). Simultaneously, community-based murals present different ways of seeing history and culture, often in opposition to that of the dominant culture. These murals, often vibrantly painted and usually depicting spectacular images, are frequently too big to be ignored, demanding consideration and responses from audiences within and outside the group.

Labelling Aboriginality

In the early 1980s, as growing interest in so-called 'traditional' art from the Central Desert and Top End of Australia gained increasing popularity, Aboriginal artists in Melbourne, like others from the south-east, contended with the exclusion of their art practices from the art world and from the general public's gaze (see Neale 2000b). South-east art suffered from a rhetoric associated with the success of assimilation policies, which denied its authenticity and viewed the adoption of conventional European art techniques, such as landscapes and realistic figurative styles, alongside Aboriginal designs, as second-rate European art, kitsch, tourist art and not really Aboriginal (Kleinert 2000; Neale 2000b). Such notions were associated with 'globalised' nineteenth-century social Darwinist attitudes of the 'corrupt hybrid', which supported ideas of Aboriginal people and their culture as being on the verge of extinction (see Stephens 2003:117–24; cf. Phillips and Steiner 1999).

This limited understanding of south-east Aboriginal art and culture has also been sustained by lingering support for mid-nineteenth-century colonialist attitudes, which attempted to control and classify members of the Aboriginal population according to their degree of 'Aboriginal blood'.[6] These attempts to define Aboriginality effectively denied Aboriginal people's assertions of their identity, which is affiliated with historical and social connections rather than skin colour and the scientific scrutiny of bloodlines (Browning 2010; Peters-Little 2000).

Melbourne's inner north

Melbourne's inner north includes places that have historical and cultural significance for Aboriginal people in the south-east, and include Northcote, Collingwood and Fitzroy. From the 1920s Aboriginal people moved to Fitzroy from regional Victoria to

find work during the depression or to escape the restrictions of mission life. Despite the slums and poverty, a vibrant and close-knit Aboriginal community was established. By the late 1940s Fitzroy was the largest Aboriginal community in Victoria, a meeting place for those visiting from rural Victoria and elsewhere, and a place that would eventually become, by the 1970s, the political and social hub of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (Broome 2005; Harris and Cavanagh 2002).

In 1973 Aboriginal community-controlled organisations emerged in and around Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, including the Aboriginal Health Service, the Aboriginal Legal Service, education groups and housing co-operatives. They provided services including sport and recreation programs, and drug and alcohol counselling, as well as language and cultural programs, and art workshops (Broome 2005; Nathan 1980; Firebrace 1977; Hall 2000; Edmonds and Clarke 2009).

The expansion of Aboriginal services in the inner north paralleled endeavours to highlight and promote buildings, places and organisations as distinctly Aboriginal, as well as reinforcing memories of Aboriginal histories. Representations of Aboriginality in murals created in the 1980s grew out of this movement and articulated an ongoing Aboriginal presence.

'Urban' Aboriginal art: *Koori Art '84* and the mural movement

In the early 1980s artists from the south-east were determined to publicly display the depth and diversity of their cultural heritage. In Sydney the *Koori Art '84* exhibition was launched to highlight, as the museum curator and art historian Margo Neale reveals, cultural and political concerns that contradicted and ignored the 'aesthetic' of the high art world. This exhibition 'inserted the word Koori into the vocabulary of the art world' (Neale 2000b:268), emphasising the unique styles that were arising from this wide-ranging representation of young, Black, self-taught and increasingly Western-educated Aboriginal artists. Further, *Koori Art '84* provided a collective space for Aboriginal artists from the south-east to gather together and represent themselves on their own terms. Neale (2000b:268) continues: 'it defined a new political position of unity, of struggle, and of reclamation, a self-assigned space separate from that allocated by the dominant culture as "Aboriginal" — a space that comes with an insistence that art be defined and judged within its social and political context'.

Aboriginal artists in Melbourne were also seeking to reinforce their positions as contemporary Aboriginal people within an urban context. The Northcote Koorie Mural design, like the works exhibited in *Koori Art '84*, fell within the paradigm of 'urban-art', a term originally coined to distinguish the work of those residing in the more populated areas of the country — generally the south-east — and to emphasise its political nature.

Although 'urban' was conceived as a means for artists in the 1980s to reveal their experiences of the continuing effects of colonisation, describing the art as 'urban'

also limited the way in which Aboriginal artists and their art were considered by the public. This included the 'arts intellengentsia', who continued to restrict south-east Aboriginal art from their collections for years to come (Neale 2000b:268; Johnson 1990). Again, this resonated with colonial classifications of Aboriginal people, which defined and controlled them by limiting Aboriginality to 'White' notions of authenticity (Moreton-Robinson 2004). The concept of the 'urban Aboriginal' continues to be restrictive as it supposes that there is only one way of being Aboriginal — 'traditional', Black and remote (Browning 2010).[7] As the art historian and Gamilaroi artist Donna Leslie argues, '"urban" might well be a term that could be used interchangeably with reference to assimilation' (Leslie 2008:128; cf. Perkins 1993 [2003]).

The Northcote Koorie Mural

The Northcote Koorie Mural was a large-scale artwork commissioned by the Aborigines Advancement League — an Aboriginal organisation that was at the forefront of lobbying for equality for Aboriginal people throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Broome 2005; Attwood 2003).

From the outset, the mural project broke new ground in the display and articulation of Aboriginality in the inner city. The size of the mural, its political content and the nature of the project meant that finding an available wall was difficult (Leslie 2008). A purpose-built wall was constructed, measuring approximately 6.5 metres by 46 metres, its magnitude serving to designate the area opposite the Northcote Town Hall as an Aboriginal space. Adopting a 'technical novelty' (that is, the large scale of the mural) allowed visual images, executed in a grand social realist style, to present different perspectives of cultural identity. The mural displayed aspects of unseen south-east Aboriginal culture, revealing a 'marginalized, alienating identity', yet one that could potentially be viewed by the public with 'new insight and meaning', providing a source of 'pride and solidarity' (LaWare 1998:143). However, the project was politically contentious. In the beginning it was vandalised with paint bombs, while other public responses ranged from 'various verbal abuses to heartfelt gestures of support' (Leslie 2008:174).

The mural, developed in 1983–84, presented confronting, realistic depictions adapted from colonial photographs of Aboriginals dressed for ceremony, and of people in chains. Images were also adapted from ceremonial drawings by nineteenth-century artists William Barak (Wurundjeri) and Tommy McRae (Kwat Kwat), including pictures of people performing ceremonies in possum skin cloaks. Other images included Europeans landing in boats, with Aboriginals running from the scene, and 1970s protest marches. The images were vibrantly coloured, demanding attention and revealing the artists' use of their Ancestors' designs, alongside contemporary art styles, to tell the region's history as remembered by Aboriginal people (Leslie 2008:175; cf. Attwood 2005).

The Northcote Koorie Mural allowed a group of young Aboriginal artists to work collaboratively for the first time on a community project. Megan Evans, an artist and teacher, co-ordinated the project, drawing together artists including the emerging Gunnai artist Ray Thomas and Gunditjmara artist Les Griggs. For both Thomas and Griggs, the mural was a turning point in their art practices, providing them with opportunities to become engaged as artists on other public art projects, as well as inspiring their own individual art practices (Leslie 2008).

Thomas, who had been mentored in landscape painting by the well-known Yorta Yorta artist Lin Onus (1948–1996), became involved in the project via a traineeship with the Aborigines Advancement League's Community Employment Program in 1983–84 (Edmonds 2007:205).[8] While the mural inspired him to continue his involvement in public art projects in Melbourne, he is best known today for art reflecting the 'traditional' Gunnai lineal and zigzag designs of his Ancestors. These designs are frequently included behind a painted tear in the corner of his photorealist landscape paintings (Keeler and Couzens 2010; Edmonds and Clarke 2009).

For Les Griggs (1962–1993), the opportunity to work on the mural was especially significant. At the time he was a prisoner in Pentridge Prison, Melbourne.[9] Griggs had been institutionalised since childhood; his life was a reflection of the policies of assimilation and the removal of children from their families. Griggs was also tutored by Lin Onus, who encouraged him to develop a distinctive artistic style. Griggs' work incorporated elements of his Gunditjmara background and the effects of colonisation, such as drug abuse, dispossession of land and imprisonment (Leslie 2008).

The mural design allowed the artists to depict images that reinforced their Aboriginality, while providing an alternative view of history. They also adopted a range of art styles that reflected their own mixed heritage. This conceptual shift in art practices, as the art historian the late Joan Kerr argued, saw the 'quotation' (rather than appropriation) of images from the dominant culture, successfully incorporating a 'transfer of meaning — even ownership — from the imperial maker to the colonised subject' (Kerr 2000:484). 'Quotation' of the dominant culture's style provided an Aboriginal view of history, giving people a language in which to articulate an identity politics that reclaimed and positively promoted difference and hybridity (Kerr 1999, 2000).

As a public artwork, the Northcote Koorie Mural is continuously subject to the public's gaze. It challenges lingering colonialist notions about the loss of south-east Aboriginal culture and acts as a reminder of the transformation of south-east culture in response to the colonising process. In the late 1990s, when the Northcote Council sold the land, the mural was relocated to its current location close to the Aborigines Advancement League in the neighbouring suburb of Thornbury. Although the mural is in need of restoration and preservation, its intention to communicate Aboriginal stories is further emphasised by its location on St George's Road, Thornbury, a busy

Figure 1: Various artists, Northcote Koorie Mural, 1983–84, at the Aborigines Advancement League, Thornbury, Victoria (section only). House-paint on concrete. Photograph Fran Edmonds, 2008. Courtesy Aborigines Advancement League

inner-city thoroughfare, where the display of south-eastern Aboriginal history can be witnessed on a daily basis by commuters (Leslie 2008; Edmonds and Clarke 2009).

Victorian Aboriginal Health Service murals

Old Victorian Aboriginal Health Service murals, 1984–85

The Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS; originally located at 136 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, and now at 186 Nicholson Street, Fitzroy) is one of the most prominent Aboriginal-run organisations in Melbourne. When established in 1973, its priority was to advance the wellbeing of the Aboriginal community of Victoria by incorporating medical care alongside more holistic programs that advocated community participation, allowing people to connect with others from around the state (Nathan 1980). VAHS also promoted art as a means of stimulating cultural awareness. Art in spaces like VAHS allowed people to assert their identity within a culturally sympathetic environment; it also realised the potential of art to designate Aboriginal places as their own.

In 1984–85 arts programs facilitated by VAHS provided artists with opportunities to create large-scale wall murals inside the building. Lin Onus, during his appointment

as artist-in-residence at the Koori Information Centre in Fitzroy, and the Chairman of VAHS, the late Bruce McGuinness (a Wiradjuri man and Onus's cousin), co-ordinated the production of a series of murals on the organisation's walls. Onus and McGuinness were pivotal figures in the development of culturally appropriate and supportive educational programs at Swinburne Institute of Technology[10] and the Koori Kollij, Collingwood, encouraging young Aboriginal artists to pursue art as a way of developing pride within their community (Foley 2000; cf. Luthi 2000).[11] Among the artists involved in the VAHS murals were Ray Thomas and two women artists, Lyn Thorpe and Lyn Briggs. The women's early connections with VAHS, through training programs at the Koori Kollij, continue to resonate in their work today as health and education professionals, where they use art to transform understanding of south-east Aboriginal culture and build community pride.[12]

The original VAHS murals included 'traditional' and contemporary styles. These included large-scale images of goannas by Lyn Thorpe, and landscapes, hand stencils, hunting and ceremonial scenes, and modern abstract designs, along with Lin Onus's spaceman portrait with an Aboriginal flag across his chest — a contemporary interpretation of the Wanjina, an image traditionally connected with the Kimberley region of Western Australia (see Ryan 1993). The works reflected the artists' mixed heritage, incorporating designs from Aboriginal groups outside the artists' immediate communities. In the south-east, people's understandings of Ancestral mark making had been disrupted by colonisation, particularly the removal of children from their families (HREOC 1997, cf. f/n 6). For many, reconnecting with their Aboriginal heritage has been a process of discovery, often assisted by art practices. The Gunditjmara/ Kerrae Wurrong artist Vicki Couzens, a pivotal figure today in reinvigorating south-east Australian art (Reynolds et al. 2005), acknowledges this process as fundamental for some people in reclaiming their culture (Edmonds 2007:307):

> You see people who don't know where they come from or who they are and they start painting dots because it's that reaching out to their Aboriginal identity and trying to find out who they are, and when they start finding that out they move on to their own [art].[13]

Images of more instantly recognisable Aboriginal designs from northern Australia (such as the dot and circle iconography found in the artwork of the Western Desert people), which had become highly marketable commodities from the late 1970s (Altman 2005), were therefore used to readily designate Aboriginality and specify Aboriginal places. This process of Aboriginal quotation of designs from outside their immediate Country differs to the appropriation of Aboriginal iconography by White artists, which represents, as Kerr (2000:487) writes, 'the unauthorised appropriation of Aboriginal styles and motifs [as] improper because it inevitably results in the icons of the powerless being absorbed into the dominant culture'. Such appropriations have

also resulted in Aboriginal people themselves commenting that it is tantamount to 'stealing from Aboriginal culture' (Fiona Foley quoted in McLean 1998:132) and becomes a form of 'symbolic colonization' (Hetti Perkins and Victoria Lynn quoted in Morphy 1998:416).

South-east artists increasingly sought alternative ways of investigating their 'traditional' iconography and incorporating this into their contemporary artworks. For example, Ray Thomas's early paintings included 'dots' and 'cross-hatching' designs. However, following conversations with Lin Onus — who raised concerns by people from the Top End about their markings being used by people in the south without authorisation — Thomas discovered, through his own research of ethnographic texts and the collections of Gunnai material culture in Museum Victoria, ways of incorporating his Ancestors' motifs in his own work (see Edmonds and Clarke 2009:34–5).

Thus, these murals designated VAHS as a distinctly Aboriginal urban space and provided artists with opportunities to work together, to showcase their art to VAHS clients and visitors and, in the process, develop new approaches to representations of south-east Aboriginality.

The old VAHS building in Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, was vacated in the early 1990s and remained derelict until 2009. The subsequent deterioration of the murals has seen them removed from their original location for restoration. Their significance, however,

Figure 2: Lyn Thorpe, *Goannas*, 1984–85, at the old Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, 136 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, Victoria. House-paint on wall plaster. Photograph Andrew Thorn and Associates. Courtesy VAHS

to the community and to the history of south-east Aboriginal art supports concerted attempts to reclaim south-east Aboriginal culture within an urban space. When ready, the newly restored murals will be installed at an appropriate site determined by VAHS (Edmonds and Clarke 2009).

New Victorian Aboriginal Health Service and floor mural, 1992

When VAHS relocated in 1992, Lyn Briggs and Lyn Thorpe were again brought together to work on a large-scale mural design, this time for the floor of the new building. Both women agree that the opportunity to work on this project assisted in reinforcing community identity, wellbeing and cultural knowledge (Edmonds and Clarke 2009:30–1).

The design of the floor mural was a collaborative process; the artists adopted a whole-of-community approach involving VAHS clients and employees. This process demonstrated the capacity of art to connect people with their community and culture, and to claim the new space as their own. As American social work academics and mural researchers Melvin Delgado and Keva Varton (1998:356) explain, creating murals in community-controlled spaces allows the community to come together and 'articulate common concerns, hopes and shared values'. Lyn Briggs (in Edmonds and Clarke 2009:31) explains this approach:

> With the murals the concept of involving our clients…[and] the community in producing that art…really took off. Because we didn't just want to do it ourselves; we wanted participation from community members. And because…it's not only a health service, it's also a meeting place, too. So we had that opportunity for people who were coming in…there's a waiting time. So instead of them sitting there waiting, we made it available for them to come and participate in the mural. And people really found that relaxing, and it actually calmed a lot of people… people get involved and weren't so conscious about time ticking away. And it was a good opportunity for people to just catch up and talk and that's one of the beauties I think about art, it's not just about the individual creating something. It's really important in our culture to actually have a shared sort of practice and we see that all the time…we always, always use art…creating things in different ways.

The floor mural was based on an adaptation of 'traditional' art styles from around Victoria, including the rainbow serpent (representing Victorian rivers), medicinal plants, animal totems and the 'all-father figure' Bunjil — an adaptation of the rock-art drawing *Bunjil and Dogs* found in the Grampians/Gariwerd national park in Western Victoria (Edmonds and Clarke 2009; Gunn 1983).[14]

In the early 1990s, at the time of the floor mural design, various political initiatives addressed Aboriginal concerns, including the Australian High Court's historic Mabo decision (1992), which recognised native title in Australia and rejected the fiction of

Australia as terra nullius (land belonging to no one) prior to European invasion. While the decision, and subsequent legislation, was hailed by many academics and politicians as a way to 'transcend the history of dispossession', it failed to 'work through the legacy of the past' (Attwood 2005:251). For Aboriginal people in Victoria, attempts to have their continuing connections to Country recognised under the Native Title Act have been frustrated by the history of colonisation since 1834. The forced removal of people from their land and the adaptation of cultural practices for survival have resulted in a native title decision that declared that their connections to Country have been 'washed away by the tide of history' (see *Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v Victoria and Others* [1998] FCA 1606; cf. Strelein 2006; Curthoys et al. 2008).

The VAHS floor mural, while not made as an assertion of native title, does, however, illustrate how people sought new ways to respond to perceptions of their lack of cultural authenticity and cultural knowledge. The work itself reminds those entering VAHS of the ongoing process of self-determination, and reflects people's knowledge of land and the significance of certain plants and animals. Ultimately it expresses Aboriginal cultural life within an Aboriginal-controlled urban space, further disrupting the notion of terra nullius and the restrictive requirements of native title legislation. Expressions of culture in the mural are not just symbolic representations, but reveal the interconnection between all aspects of society, including art, land, health and history. The floor mural reflects the capacity of community-based art projects to reinvigorate

Figure 3: Lyn Thorpe and Lyn Briggs, installed floor mural, 1992, new Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, 186 Nicholson Street, Fitzroy, section showing only Bunjil and dogs. Photograph Fran Edmonds, 2007. Courtesy VAHS

culture, contributing through community approaches to the process of culture-making. These include community involvment, such as consultation on the mural's design and pride in the finished product, providing opportunities for those involved in the project to confront 'internalized prejudices', a consequence of the marginalisation of south-east Aboriginal people (LaWare 1998:144; cf. HREOC 1997). The mural's construction — where the physical act of working together assisted the community to 'own' the space — facilitated outcomes that resonate with Lin Onus's philosophy that 'real art is for everyone and something to be shared' (Neale 2000a:120).

BEEM artists murals

In the new millennium, as reconciliation and social justice initiatives from the 1990s struggled to achieve effective outcomes for the Aboriginal community, recognition of the need for more inclusive approaches between government organisations, researchers and funding bodies became priorities for developing sustainable and relevant programs. These included developing long-term consultations and establishing ethical and culturally appropriate working relationships with Aboriginal communities. Today in Melbourne, cross-cultural projects that involve urban-based Aboriginal groups rely on methods that involve the Aboriginal community at all levels of the process (Pyett et al. 2009).

A group of mural artists who poignantly reveal the potential for murals to advocate for social justice and extend cross-cultural collaborations form the BEEM Aboriginal artists collective. This group has, over the past seven years, been instrumental in transforming the outdoor area of the Collingwood Housing Estate, as well as public spaces in and around Fitzroy.[15] The BEEM artists collective is associated with many of the Aboriginal homeless from the area who frequently meet in the Estate's park. They are known as the 'Parkies' and many suffer from extremely poor health (Yarra City Council 2010).

In response to endeavours to commemorate the Collingwood Housing Estate as a meeting place for the Aboriginal homeless, as well as the BEEM artists and their kin, a collaborative mural project was initiated in 2004. Drawing on the support of local service providers, including the Collingwood Housing Estate Arts Committee (CHEAC), VicHealth Arts and Environment Mental Health Program, City of Yarra Arts and Cultural Services Unit and the Collingwood Neighbourhood House among others (DHS 2005:46), BEEM artists in collaboration with CHEAC were able to determine how the project would be managed and implemented.

The overall conception and eventual success of the project was due to the commit-ment of Gunditjmara man Eugene Lovett and his late sister Denise Lovett. Both Eugene and Denise had connections with the Parkies, and established Parkies Inc. as a way of providing ongoing support for the homeless, as well as opportunities for them to become involved in the mural design. The location for the mural, at the entrance to

the Harmsworth Street underground car park, was chosen as it is close to the Gazebo, a sheltered area that is a gathering place for many of the local Aboriginal community. The mural sweeps around the entire entrance to the disused car park and consists of a number of vibrantly painted large-scale landscapes, depictions of 'traditional' Aboriginal people in mythical landscapes, and bird and animal life. One painting of galahs in a gum tree represents the 2004 struggle between the Parkies and the Smith Street traders in Collingwood, who wanted to ban them from meeting in the area (Schneiders 2004:4). The mural entitled *The Cave*, a depiction of a cave backlit by a full moon, showing Aboriginal men and women inside and outside the cave in 'traditional' poses, also commemorates Parkies who have met locally over the years (Eugene Lovett, pers. comm., October 2008). The mural now provides the entrance to the underground Art Park, which is used to house Fringe Festival performances and rotating art exhibitions (Mangan 2010), and continues to remind visitors entering the space of the resilience and survival of Aboriginal culture in the area.

The outcome of the BEEM mural project reveals a community art project successfully incorporating and respecting the diverse talents and histories of individuals within the community. An understanding of the continuing legacy of colonisation and its impact on Aboriginal people, especially within the urban environment, is important in broadening community understandings and connections and in establishing

Figure 4: BEEM artists, *Galahs and Magpies*, 2004. Section only of Housing Commission flats underground car park mural in Harmsworth Street, Collingwood, Victoria. Photograph Fran Edmonds, 2008. Courtesy Eugene Lovett and Parkies Victoria Inc.

trustworthy relationships across cultural and social divides (Pyett et al. 2009). As a result the BEEM artists' initiatives have developed successful networks with service-providing agencies and also with other cultural groups on the Estate, including the Vietnamese, Afghan and African communities (see ANTAR 2004). This has enabled groups that have had few opportunities to connect with each other to work together to enhance a community space. Following the successful opening of the car park mural in July 2004, Denise Lovett (quoted in DHS 2005:55) acknowledged in a community report that:

> A spirit of generosity pervaded the place and people who have on occasions been marginalised were acknowledged and supported. This opened up relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, as well as between residents of the estate and people of the park. The night was full of hope and possibility.

New BEEM mural (Safety Improvement Mural), 2009

New mural designs involving the BEEM artists and other groups have been realised recently in a mural collaboration initiated by the Neighbourhood Justice Centre in Collingwood, in collaboration with the Napier Studio — a street-art studio that provides support and art workshops for young, often marginalised and isolated street artists in the Fitzroy area (see City of Yarra 2008) — and CHEAC. The new murals are also located on the Collingwood Housing Estate, this time at 253 Hoddle Street. They were developed to improve the safety of a previously 'dark and dingy space' (NJC 2010).

BEEM artists were approached by the Neighbourhood Justice Centre to engage the two groups who frequently use the space — local youth and Parkies — in a mural project. The joint project, completed in December 2009, has transformed the area into a 'bright and colourful' location, creating a 'sense of pride and ownership' for those who spend time there (NJC 2010). The BEEM artists and the Parkies designed art for seven pillars in the area, depicting 'traditional' hunting scenes, people in possum skin cloaks, and animal and bird life. Artists from the Collingwood Neighbourhood House worked with young people from the Collingwood Housing Estate and the Napier Studio to develop larger art panels on the wall behind the pillars, displaying huge graffiti-like images reminiscent of cartoon characters and superheroes (NJC 2010).[16]

The mural project was an attempt to bring the two most prominent users of the space — the Parkies and the youth — together. Both groups had distinct artistic styles. BEEM artists, using their formal figurative, realistic and mythical designs, contrasted with the graffiti-style designs of the youth and Napier Studio artists. Thus, the mural was not without tensions, as the two different art styles and the groups developing them contrasted in their approaches. There were also issues around the content of some images, including those that were perceived by some housing residents as

Figure 5: BEEM artists, pillar murals at the Collingwood Housing Estate, 2009, Hoddle Street, Collingwood, Victoria. Photograph Neighbourhood Justice Centre, 2009. Courtesy Eugene Lovett and Neighbourhood Justice Centre

inappropriate (the BEEM artists included naked images in their design) and others, by the Napier Studio artists, that were initially viewed as racist. Through a process of negotiation, once again involving Eugene Lovett, the original designs have remained intact, alerting the viewer to the capacity of art to 'push the boundaries and make people think' (Fran Whitty, pers. comm., May 2010).

Outcomes of the project, along with the mural, included improving the safety of the area through extra lighting and enhancing cross-cultural encounters. The mural project provided diverse groups with the opportunity to assert ownership of a space and to learn from each other, while the art-making process itself provided the Indigenous community with ways of acting as leaders, in transforming an urban and often hostile landscape into a place that celebrates and asserts an ongoing Aboriginal presence in the area, alongside a capacity to broach cultural divides between disaffected groups (Akibib and Trybala 2009).[17]

The BEEM murals reveal community control and ownership of projects, which advance social justice and assist health and wellbeing initiatives, as well as cultural development and revitalisation of a space. The murals also reflect the potential of large-scale public artworks to alert the public to the presence of Aboriginal people in the inner city in ways that are positive and productive, while providing a disenfranchised group with the opportunity to 'reclaim lost territory' — in both a literal and a figurative sense — and to 'recover history and aspects of traditional heritage' (Marschall 2002:46).

The Aboriginal flag and the 3CR mural: new approaches to murals

The increasing public acceptance of street-art, which includes graffiti and stencil-art, has recently influenced approaches to Aboriginal mural production. Murals, as opposed to graffiti art, are always legal and designed to remain in situ for extended lengths of time; their installation generally involves consultation with property owners and the broader community (Dewar 2010). Gamilaroi/Kamilaroi artist Reko Rennie, who started his career doing street-art, has created a number of murals that reflect his distinctive style.[18]

The murals by Reko Rennie incorporate his street-art style, including the lineal/diamond shape designs of his Gamilaroi Ancestors. The murals also present stories of Aboriginality from new perspectives, such as cultural reclamation and survival. While these murals differ from the community-based approach of those discussed above, they do involve broad community consultation and participation, perhaps indicating a growing willingness by others to see south-east Aboriginality and Aboriginal histories with fresh eyes.

While murals or street-art are rarely critiqued in the 'high art' world (Dewar 2010), Rennie's images move constantly from the street to the 'high-art' gallery. This shift of graffiti and stencil-art from being subversive to becoming increasingly popular within the broader arts community highlights a continuing ambivalence towards street-art

Figure 6: Reko Rennie, *Remember Me*, Aboriginal flag on private residence, North Fitzroy, acrylic on brick. Photograph Fran Edmonds. Courtesy Reko Rennie

itself. For instance, its connection with vandalism impacts on street-art's acceptance by many as a legitimate art practice,[19] where images that are contentious or comment on socio-political issues, including Indigenous ones, continue to incite various public reactions. This was emphasised when the Aboriginal flag mural painted by Rennie in 2005 — a work commissioned by a North Fitzroy resident for her outside street wall, with the words 'Remember Me' stencilled through the middle — was desecrated, following then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008 (Reko Rennie, pers. comm., May 2010). Such attacks highlight the ongoing tensions surrounding Aboriginal rights (Aubrey-Poiner and Phillips 2010) and also reveal the ambivalent position of public artworks, as locals from the area responded by attempting to overwrite the racist remarks with yellow paint. The interaction between the residents and the image reveals the mural's capacity to encapsulate community concerns, allowing the public to condemn racism in positive ways. Such responses enable an interactive communal approach, which facilitates a dialogue between the viewer and the art. Rennie continues: 'It's in a public forum where everyone has access to it. Everyone can have comment on it. At times…things get added to it, sometimes people write things on it and it's all part of the interesting bit of communication' (Reko Rennie, pers. comm., May 2010).

The image of the flag also resonates with Aboriginal graffiti in the inner city. As academic Christine Dewar describes, those who reveal obvious signs of Aboriginality in their work, such as the Aboriginal flag, 'trump all other graffiti writers' as they declare 'not only "I was here", but also "I was the first"' (Dewar 2010:104).

A recently completed large-scale public mural appears on the 3CR Community Radio building in Smith Street, Collingwood. The mural design was developed in consultation between 3CR, Rennie, Wathaurong photographer Bindi Cole, and street artist and designer Tom Civil. Local Aboriginal youth were also encouraged to participate in the project (Reko Rennie, pers. comm., May 2010).

While 3CR is not an Aboriginal community organisation, over the years it has provided a voice for many marginalised groups. The organisation, situated in the Collingwood/Fitzroy area since 1977, has been close to and supported many political and social activities involving the Aboriginal community (3CR Community Radio 2010).

The mural was a cross-cultural collaboration marking the thirtieth anniversary of 3CR. Its colourful displays reflect the history of 3CR, as well as the backgrounds of the artists involved in the project. Rennie's work on 'a series of protestor silhouettes and a few life size images of protestors with placards' symbolises the station's continuing role as 'Melbourne's voice of dissent' (Rennie 2010). On the lane side of the building Rennie has also included the Aboriginal colours of black, red and yellow as a background to 'a larger than life Aboriginal man with a spear, reflect[ing] the history of the area and [it] pay[s] respect to the traditional owners of Fitzroy and Collingwood, the Wurundjeri people' (Rennie 2010).

Other work on the mural includes Bindi Coles' installation of contemporary light boxes containing nostalgic photographs of Aboriginal women from the Australian Women's Land Army and the Yorta Yorta singer/songwriter Kutcha Edwards. While the mural itself took many months to complete, reflecting the complexities associated with designing artwork that considers many different interest groups, the mural has transformed the building into an iconic visual attraction.

The 3CR mural illustrates the continuing presence of Aboriginal people in an urban landscape. While the mural is a cross-cultural, collaborative artwork, its defining theme reveals Aboriginal people as the 'first ones here', whose history of contending with attempts to oppress, control and define their culture since colonisation situates them as the most experienced in dealing with issues of marginalisation in the Melbourne area.

Finally, Rennie's murals respond to the high level of visual literacy in the twenty-first century,[20] a result of the growing influence of multimedia, advertising and graphic designs (Dewar 2010:13). The murals also respond to Aboriginal cultural practices where markings and representational images have always transmitted messages and cultural understandings (Morphy 2008; van Toorn 2006).[21] Today, Rennie's work provides an opportunity for more people to see contemporary south-east Aboriginal images and to learn the stories behind them. Whether these images are on the street or in gallery exhibitions, they become part of a process that facilitates an awareness of

Figure 7: Reko Rennie, *3CR Mural: Aboriginal Warrior and Silhouettes*, 2010, 3CR Community Radio station, Smith Street, Collingwood, Victoria. Photograph Fran Edmonds, 2010. Courtesy Reko Rennie

Aboriginal histories, and of people continuing culture-making within the context of twenty-first-century urban lifestyles.

Conclusion

By revealing the 'conflicting attitudes and opinions' of the past, murals contribute to 'history-making'; in relating the memories, events and images relevant to minority groups, these are 're-membered' and memorialised, facilitating a recognition of 'different histories' and their connection with alternative historical truths (Attwood 2005:253–5).

The murals discussed in this paper mark both memory and place for the Aboriginal community in Melbourne's inner north and are counter-representations of mainstream social and political attitudes, contesting outsider perceptions of Aboriginality. The diversity of art styles revealed in the murals reflects the mixed heritage and experiences of Aboriginal people, reclaiming culture and identity within an Aboriginal worldview. The murals are also culturally based, as they are determined by Aboriginal community imperatives, revealing the complexity and ambivalence of Aboriginality through art practices. In the process of creating the murals, there are opportunities for Aboriginal artists to affirm their survival and to reclaim hybridity as a positive assertion of Aboriginality, which recognises the influence of cross-cultural experiences, contesting ideas of authenticity, where many artists still contend with opinions about their art and culture being fixed in another time and place. Ultimately, the murals expose the approaches Aboriginal people are using to determine their own identity and representations of their own culture and histories. Their large-scale and prominent positions potentially advance cross-cultural dialogue and enhance understandings of Aboriginal experiences, while endeavouring to advance the struggle for the right to be different and for issues of equality and social justice to be recognised by the broader society.

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Notes

1. The 1967 referendum provided the Commonwealth with control of Aboriginal affairs and 'symbolically marked the beginning of a new citizenship for indigenous Australians' (Anderson, I 2008:760).
2. I use the term 're-presented' in the context discussed by Attwood (2005), where he acknowledges that 'history' from Aboriginal perspectives relies on oral, discursive accounts and memory, which are shaped by contemporary discourses, 'most of which are closely connected to the politics of difference' (Attwood 2005:258, f/n 55).

3. The various spellings of the word Koori/e reflect adoption of the word by different organisations. However, the general spelling throughout this paper is Koori — without an 'e'.

4. See, for example, Johnston (1991) for the Deaths in Custody report; the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (1991) for a timeline of reconciliation initiatives throughout the 1990s; and the National Native Title Tribunal and Australian Government Solicitor (1998) for commentary on the workings of the Native Title Act. Later in the 1990s, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission reported on the Stolen Generations, i.e. the removal of children from their families; see HREOC (1997).

5. Sabine Marschall (2002:45) asserts that the growth in urban Black South African 'community mural' art in the 1990s (that is, art that involves the local community in the process of painting, where the process is as important as the imagery) was closely linked with 'radical political liberation and the end of the apartheid regime'. LaWare's work concentrates on the minority Chicanas/os community in Chicago, and the rise of Chicana/o murals from the 1960s during the civil rights movement. Similarities to other minority groups in the United States are also acknowledged, including the Afro-American community, which, in the late 1960s and 70s, created 'people's' murals — for example, the 'Wall of Respect', a mural celebrating Afro-American heroes painted in 1967 on a reclaimed abandoned wall site in Chicago, which indicated Black pride and 'became a medium for expressing arguments for solidarity, for ethnic pride and for political activism' (LaWare 1998:140).

6. In 1869 Victoria was the first state to pass legislation that 'officially' sought to separate Aboriginal people (specifically children) from their families. This was an attempt to control the Aboriginal population and encourage European lifestyles on missions and reserves. Official policies, designed to 'breed the colour out', began in Victoria more earnestly than elsewhere, forcing Aboriginal people from that region to adapt their cultural practices earlier if they were to survive (Broome 2005; McCalman 2006). Later, the 1886 *Aborigines Act* (commonly referred to as the Half-Caste Act) became the first official Act to attempt to assimilate the Aboriginal population, by determining who was entitled to remain on missions or reserves according to their degree of 'Aboriginal blood'. These policies of assimilation lasted until 1967 (HREOC 1997:57–60).

7. Artists interviewed for my PhD were adamant that they did not associate their art with the term 'urban', viewing it as restrictive (Edmonds 2007). Note: transcripts of interviews with artists referred to throughout this paper — excluding personal communications with Eugene Lovett, Fran Whitty and Reko Rennie — are taken from my PhD and were conducted between September 2004 and February 2005. All transcripts and recordings of those interviews are deposited in the Koorie Heritage Trust Oral History Unit, Melbourne.

8. For a discussion of the appointment in 1983 of Aboriginal directors on the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, see Foley (2000:36–7). The Aboriginal Arts Board was another response to calls for Aboriginal control of their own organisations and

provided some support and funding opportunities for Aboriginal people to gain access to arts programs and further education from the 1980s.

9. Griggs is among a number of prominent Aboriginal artists who were introduced to art in prison, or used their time in prison to assert their identity through their art practice. The late Ronald Bull (1943–1979, Wiradjuri) is among them. See Kleinert (1999) for details.

10. Now Swinburne University.

11. Also see Lyn Thorpe interview with Fran Edmonds, November 2004, and Lyn Briggs interview with Fran Edmonds, January 2005.

12. Until 2007 Lyn Briggs was the Women and Children's Program Manager at VAHS; she continues in the Education and Training Unit at the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation. Lyn Thorpe was, until 2009, an art and welfare teacher at Northland Secondary College, Melbourne. Both women continued their art practices within their professions to promote art, identity and community wellbeing (see Edmonds and Clarke 2009). For example, Lyn Briggs' health promotion posters and other artworks connected to her work continue to remain highly visible reminders of the need to transmit messages and images that resonate with the Aboriginal community; see Briggs 2009.

13. See Edmonds (2007) for further examples of artists' comments on the adoption of Aboriginal iconography from other areas.

14. Links between rock art and graffiti art, including large-scale renditions of the Wanjina in Perth, have been studied by archaeologists who argue a connection exists between graffiti artists employing the role of cultural heritage in their activities and the continuing preservation of rock art from the past found in remote rock shelters in the Kimberley (Frederick and O'Connor 2009). While the authors concede there is little direct equivalence between rock art and graffiti produced today, like rock art, graffiti has become 'an extension of our human mark-making legacy' (Frederick and O'Connor 2009:154). I would argue this also extends to murals.

15. Other murals are the North Yarra Community Health mural, 75 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, and a mural at Ivan's Smith Street Barber Shop, 115 Smith Street, Fitzroy.

16. Also Fran Whitty, former director, Neighbourhood Justice Centre, pers. comm., May 2010.

17. Also see the YouTube film clip from *Yarra Reporter* (2009) titled 'BEEM artists collaborate with Napier Street artists to beautify high-rises'.

18. See Reko Rennie's blog postings at <www.abc.net.au/arts/stories/s2652623.htm> for details of his progression from street artist to an award-winning artist with an Australia Council residency in Paris in 2009, when his mural of big red and pink kangaroos, with traditional Gamilaroi designs in the background, adorned the streets. His work is also exhibited by Dianne Tanzer Gallery, Gertrude Street, Fitzroy; see <http://diannetanzergallery.net.au/blog/>.

19. Various newspaper articles have commented recently on the continuing debates

between local councils and graffiti artists in the inner city and the legitimacy of the art remaining on public buildings. See, for example, Gill 2010a, 2010b; Webb 2010.

20. While I recognise that visual literacy, like visual rhetoric, encompasses a vast body of literature and theory around the capacity of the visual image to communicate messages, a discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper. For further discussion of theories around visual rhetoric and communication through images, see Smith et al. (2005); Kress and van Leeuwen (2006).

21. Also see Frederick and O'Connor (2009).

Chapter 2

Making a mark: Negotiations in the sale of Aboriginal art

Barbara Ashford

Abstract: *Dealers in Aboriginal art mediate categories of value through their particular practices of representation of objects and through the social relationships they foster with artists, buyers and artworks. In this paper I examine the social relationships and situated practices undertaken in the marketing of Aboriginal art at Fire-Works Gallery in Brisbane, where I carried out intensive fieldwork from 2002 to 2004. For an anthropological approach to art, one that encompasses the social relationships through which art objects circulate, I draw on the work of Alfred Gell, while for social theories of economics and value I turn to the work of Stephen Gudeman and David Graeber. Using the fieldwork data I gathered, I examine the negotiation of valued and shifting cultural categories that are dynamically formed and reformed by social agents. In this paper I present a critical analysis of an exhibition,* Minimal Fuss, *shown at the gallery in 2003 to focus on the contestation and negotiation of culturally informed values and categories of fine art, Aboriginality and commodities.*

I shift from a focus on the aesthetics of Aboriginal art to the nature of work undertaken in the negotiation of value carried out at a dealership. I argue that through the relationships formed in the exchange process, dealers both make and mark culture. In the process the gallery, art and the artists are also made and marked as commodities, and while notions of authenticity are central to the value of the artworks, I show how value is shifting and authenticity unstable.

Introduction: marking and making

In his book *Painting Culture*, Fred Myers (2002) presents a study of the extended processes that create Aboriginal fine art. He argues that as art objects are circulated in the market, assumptions are 'being made about their essential nature, so that

the process of practice is lost. Thus evaluations of these paintings tend to be rather superficially aesthetic — based on principles that may have little to do with the painters' own concerns and practices' (Myers 2002:83). Practices of circulation are generally absent in evaluations of Aboriginal art. In this paper I build on Myers' work and examine how, in the process of circulation, an art dealer navigates disparate value frameworks and tensions arising within a complex field of cultural production. I shift from discussions of aesthetics to the nature of the work undertaken in the negotiation of value carried out at a dealership trading in Aboriginal fine art.

I draw on my own research carried out between 2002 and 2004 in which I investigated the contemporary conditions and relationships at a commercial gallery. The gallery I chose for the research was Fire-Works,[1] situated in inner-city Brisbane, where the Director, Michael Eather, had been collaborating with Aboriginal artists for a decade. Collaborations had taken the form of political statements through artworks, friendships, business partnerships and family relationships. At the time that I was undertaking my field research, Michael Eather and Fire-Works had become established within the art-dealing community.

Over three years of fieldwork I examined the collusions and contests between artists, dealers and buyers who frequented the gallery. Information was gathered through participant observation, interviews, and the analysis of interpretative materials and archived records that provide a 'thick description' (see Geertz 1973) of an art dealer's practices and the social networks shaping the contemporary circulation of Aboriginal art. I also acknowledge that such practices take place in a broader, politically influenced framework and therefore touch on debates encompassing art, social justice, political action and authenticity. These issues become elements that feed into the constitution of the value of Aboriginal art and identity, as art becomes commodity in the contemporary market.

Reasons for placing value on paintings, as art, are varied. Value can arise from the objects' perceived relational ability to communicate ideas, express emotions, describe scenes, delight the senses and allude to other artworks or common experiences (see Lopes 2005:625). A painting, classified as Aboriginal art, can be valued for any combination of these reasons, but an additional and constant attribute by which objects created by Indigenous artists are valued is the definable link to Aboriginal culture. In defining what Aboriginal culture is, the dealer of Aboriginal art at Fire-Works is situated between Indigenous producers and non-Indigenous consumers. It is here that he structures and manipulates cultural difference within certain parameters, limited by the buyer's imagination, art world conventions, the availability of stock and the intentions of producers.

In addition, this is a process of valuation that requires the quality of authenticity to be accepted by producers, as well as consumers. Neither producers nor consumers can interpret these negotiations as wholly spurious, as this threatens the value of the art in the market and causes rifts in the crucial relationships on which a dealer relies.

Thus the marketing of Aboriginal art entails the negotiation of disparate values and identities. In approaching the trade in Aboriginal art from this perspective, I place an analytical focus on how social practices and relations constitute values and meanings in the contemporary market.

Aboriginal art: a White thing?[2]

Interpretations regarding the contemporary trade in Aboriginal art have tended to concentrate either on the aesthetic dimension of works or the cultural understanding of the artists. Discourses of art and aesthetics concentrate on the creative and expressive aspects of objects (Johnson 1997; McCulloch 2001; Ryan 2007). These commentaries elide the part played by dealers in constituting art as a valued commodity and cultural product. Writers taking an anthropological approach to Aboriginal art tend to also omit the work of traders and concentrate on questions of ethnography that deal with the cultural integrity and significance of the art to Indigenous producers (Caruana 2003; Morphy 1998). Among this scholarly concentration on artistic forms and styles and the relationships of these concepts to Indigenous cultural frameworks, Myers' (2002) work stands out as an examination of marking out Australian Indigenous art as a commodity.

Given its close connection with diverse Aboriginal cultures, the commoditisation of Aboriginal art can attract a critique that highlights the denigrating effects of a market economy on producers' lives and the corruption of cultural authenticity (Fry and Willis 1989, 2002). This critique rightly warns against an exploitative appropriation of Aboriginal culture and destruction of Indigenous cultural difference. Yet, from this perspective, the agency of Aboriginal artists is insufficiently acknowledged and assumptions regarding the destructive intentions of traders and consumers ignore complex collaborations between artists and dealers. The diverse conditions and relationships of production and distribution of contemporary art practice are not sufficiently addressed, nor are the consequent shifting interpretations and meanings that are given to the art as it moves through the market as a commodity.

The practices and discourses that shape the contemporary circulation of Aboriginal art have arisen from a specific historical, colonial context. Morphy (2001) raises this point in his analysis of the historical process of inclusion of Aboriginal art into fine art galleries of the west. This was a process by which objects produced by Aboriginal people became accepted and exhibited as 'art', although similar objects had been categorised previously as ethnographica. In the market, artists, dealers and buyers are socially involved in acts of cultural representation and persuasion. These acts take place in frameworks of broader discussions regarding art, social justice, political action, authenticity and economics. However, while tensions in the commoditisation of Aboriginal art are the product of a specific history and a distinctive art world, artists, dealers and buyers are not passive in the process of bringing art to the market.

In particular, Morphy (2000:142) notes elsewhere that the sale of Indigenous Australian art is 'an arena that Aboriginal people who have been unwillingly colonised have turned to as a means of asserting their rights and autonomy in the transformed postcolonial context'.

Aboriginal artists, buyers and their dealers variously participate in the construction and articulation of self-knowledge and the knowledge of other in a world of ambiguous cultural boundaries.

In this milieu, the establishment and transformation of cultural identities can take the shape of the revitalisation of language, tradition and history or, ironically, the creation of new forms of artistic expression. Both transformative actions are capable of articulating community identity and concerns. In the commoditisation of Aboriginal art, it is the production of new forms and the interventions of non-Indigenous dealers and audiences that are envisaged as creating a contaminating product influenced by dominant and colonising hegemonies. The Aboriginal art market has developed and continues to operate with variable Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaboration, and the discursive denial of any degree of agency on the part of Indigenous artists and communities is also a form of erasure. Valuation in the commoditisation of Aboriginal art is a contested field in which the dealer, artists and buyers enter into struggles over the construction and evaluation of cultural categories, as well as the worth of art objects and themselves.

Concepts of value and art

To understand the shifting complexities of the constitution of value as process I followed David Graeber (2001), who discounts the intrinsic qualities of objects and questions the theory of labour value to raise issues of judgment on the part of subjects. Like Graeber, I contend that value arises from struggles over the validation of disparate conceptualisations of worth and appropriateness. Through active engagement with objects and others, subjects formulate judgments of value that involve personal, communal and economic dimensions but do so in socially structured frameworks that shape and temper experience.

To analyse the complex and shifting dialectic between personal, communal and institutional value frameworks I draw on the work of Stephen Gudeman (2001). While Graeber locates value creation in the social interactions between agents, Gudeman structures a cultural and interactive model of inconsistent or incommensurate domains of value that are locally specified. Gudeman argues that the communal and market value realms constitute all economies in varying permutations, thereby acknowledging that social relations form the basis for and impact upon market activity. During my research I found that buyers articulate an interest in the distinction or 'otherness' of Aboriginal art and an important part of the work of the dealer is to provide an insight into a 'distanced' Aboriginal culture. However, the dealer frames knowledge

about Aboriginal culture in such a way that artists are able to challenge conventional understandings about Indigenous culture, while buyers are also presented with recognisable markers of Aboriginality. Franca Tamasari (2006) argues that challenges to conventional cultural understandings through art objects can be 'domesticated' and controlled within the confines of the domain of fine art. Such a confinement can be powerful and therefore the framing of how Aboriginal art is received by non-Indigenous buyers carries an inherently political dimension.

Buyers who frequent Fire-Works seek the guidance of the dealer in learning about art and Aboriginality and this affords the dealer didactic power, which also comes with responsibility. The dealer, Michael Eather, is sought out by buyers to clarify issues of 'authentic' knowledge concerning the art being offered for sale and consequently must validate his own value as 'the expert'. This is the 'politics of value' that is carried out at Fire-Works.[3] The politics of value concerns the validation of expertise and authenticity of art objects that carries over to the dealer and his gallery. Michael Eather has to present himself and Fire-Works Gallery as an appropriate place for the sale of Aboriginal fine art. Crucial ways in which this work is carried out are through the dissemination of knowledge, the presentation of exhibitions, and the building and maintaining of reputations. I return to these practices in a discussion about a particular exhibition, but first will clarify my approach here to the concept of 'art'.

Alfred Gell (1998) foregrounds the actors or agents involved in networks of social relations that surround artworks, arguing that an anthropology of art should be based neither on aesthetics nor visual communication. In making his argument, Gell deviates from the symbolic and formal dimensions of art making to focus on the relations and actions that define art. While this methodology guided my work, I have found that in the creation of the value of Aboriginal art there is a political authority that shapes how people and objects are accepted and understood that is linked to symbolic social constructions of meaning and worth. Pinney and Thomas (2001) noted that Gell's exclusion of symbolism is problematic in that the importance of cultural convention is minimalised in shaping the reception of art objects. I do not argue that Aboriginal art is a Western invention or that the consumer solely creates the art but acknowledge that Indigenous producers do operate with intention and take positions of variable agency in exchange relationships and processes that are negotiated through the dealership.

Practices of value creation

Fire-Works began life as the commercial and exhibiting arm of an artists' co-operative, the Campfire Group. Campfire constituted a shifting membership of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists who experimented with art forms and collaborated on projects with a distinct political edge, and as the artists developed their careers some of their relationships with Fire-Works endured. Fire-Works Gallery and the Campfire artists had a symbiotic relationship that was based on friendships and mutual interests in art and

Aboriginal politics. At the time of my research there was an economic interdependency between the two institutions; artists relied upon the gallery for administrative and commercial support, while the gallery relied on the artists for quality stock and some degree of legitimacy as a gallery dealing in contemporary Aboriginal art.

Michael Eather has developed a reputation over the years of his involvement in Campfire and Fire-Works as an expert on art and Aboriginality.[4] Artists rely upon him to represent their artworks and support their careers, while buyers articulate an interest in the distinction of Aboriginal art. The knowledge that many non-Indigenous buyers continue to have about Aboriginal culture is often patchy, therefore an important part of the work of the dealer is to provide an insight into Aboriginal culture, tempered by diverse discourses and expectations. The dealer at Fire-Works negotiates these diverse understandings about commodities, and art, and Aboriginality as he represents objects and people.

The dealer seeks to frame knowledge about Aboriginal culture in such a way that satisfies the concerns of contemporary artists and buyers. He does so by presenting the art in such a way that artists are able to challenge conventional understandings about Indigenous culture, while buyers can still be presented with recognisable markers of Aboriginality and fine art. In turn, the dealer must also validate his own value as the expert to his buying clients.

The display of objects by the dealer involves more than seeking out potential clients and promoting the distinction and authenticity of the Aboriginal identity of the producers and their products. Objects in this gallery are also cast as fine art, commodities that are viewed with expectations of aesthetic value. To undertake the movement of art objects through the process of valuation, the dealer must present and talk about works in certain ways deemed appropriate to their consumption. I do not advocate a particular institutional definition of art in preference to those that favour the aesthetic dimension but acknowledge the patterns of collective activity that endow aesthetic judgments upon the art that moves through Fire-Works.

The dealer at Fire-Works is positioned to consider the aspects of art making and marking valued by artists and himself so that burning issues of variable Indigenous experience, artistic integrity and self-interest problematically inform decisions regarding artworks framed for the market. The value of Aboriginal art objects is linked to the legitimisation of the knowledge and practices of the dealer, the gallery, artists and the art. Reputations of people, places and objects are managed and navigated at Fire-Works to negotiate and stabilise value.

While cultural values of the dominant settler state provide guidelines for appropriate response to and consumption of art ensconced in discourses of art history and anthropology, these discourses are not completely determinant. I argue that value arises from continual struggles over the validation of disparate conceptualisations of worth and appropriateness. To illustrate further the certain practices used in negotiating and formulating value, I now describe the organisation of a particular art exhibition

that highlights how a dealer presents artwork through the manipulation of display, knowledge and reputations.

Negotiations: using reputation to sell art

Towards the end of September 2003 the dealer and gallery arranged for the staging of an exhibition entitled *Minimal Fuss* (Figure 1). The showing featured three artists; two were female and Indigenous, and one was the male, non-Indigenous painter Tony Tuckson. The two women featured, Emily Kngwarreye and Minnie Pwerle, were both from the desert community Utopia, 230 kilometres north-east of Alice Springs. The Anmatyerr and Alyawarr Aboriginal people lived here on an 1800 square kilometre property, which was formerly a pastoral station that was returned to Aboriginal control in 1979. During the 1980s women at Utopia had practised batik making after being taught the technique by craftspeople Suzy Bryce and Julia Murray and Fregon fabric artist Nyangkula Brown. In 1988 Rodney Gooch of the Central Australian Aboriginal Artists' Media Association took over as organiser of the Utopia Women's Batik Group and suggested that the women produce a batik that would tell their own story. Eighty-eight women submitted a panel each to the large major work that was purchased for the Robert Holmes à Court collection.[5] Subsequently (in 1989) these contributions by the women of Utopia became the opening exhibit for Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute in Adelaide (McCulloch 2001:82).

Following this success, the artists of Utopia were encouraged to paint on canvas using acrylics and the first painting project attracted positive critical attention. In particular, Emily Kngwarreye produced works that were met with critical acclaim and she became one Australia's most significant contemporary artists, being included in important public and private collections and shown at the 1997 Venice Biennale (Kreczmanski and Birnberg 2004:130–1). As a senior woman in the community, this artist had a depth of knowledge concerning traditional song cycles, body painting and dances, and her paintings depicted her rightful Dreamings. Colourful canvases of clouds of desert flowers, twisted roots of the yam, seeds of native grass, emu and lizard were the subjects that she depicted.

Minnie Pwerle's work also drew on the designs used in a women's ceremony, Awelye, carried out in her country, Atnwengerrp. Having begun painting in 1999 when she was in her seventies, Pwerle depicted the designs painted on the upper parts of women's bodies when they took part in ceremonies. Bush foods local to the region of Utopia were represented on canvas with free-flowing brush strokes creating patterns of brightly coloured lines. This artist passed away in 2006, ten years after the death of Emily Kngwarreye. At the time of the exhibition she was the only participating artist who was still alive and painting.

The artists at Utopia had not originally worked through a community co-operative to distribute their work and, instead, had sold through individual arrangements with

Figure 1: Catalogue illustration for the exhibition *Minimal Fuss*, 2003, Fire-Works Gallery, Brisbane

a variety of dealers throughout Australia and overseas. Since 1999 a community arts centre, Urapuntja, had been established to organise exhibitions and manage the prodigious output of the artists in the region. For *Minimal Fuss,* Fire-Works had accessed Minnie's work through collaboration with Dacou Gallery in Adelaide, where the director, Fred Torres, had a family connection to women at the community as the son of Barbara Weir and grandson of Minnie Pwerle.

The works shown in the *Minimal Fuss* exhibition at Fire-Works Gallery had a connecting theme of the appearance of abstract minimalism, a spare art style that had emerged in the 1960s and become popular in the 1980s. Minimalist artworks possess a pared-down simplicity that tends to fit the décor of modern interiors. At the time that *Minimal Fuss* was being held the dealer at Fire-Works was attempting to deepen his networks with designers as a way of increasing sales and the profile of Aboriginal art.

In line with the minimalist style, the intricate vibrancy seen in Minnie Pwerle's earlier paintings was no longer evident and the lines had become starker, less colour was used and the patterning was simplified. The marks on the canvas had been executed with a newly demonstrated economy combined with the artist's usual confident brushwork. It could be argued that this newer style allowed the artist to produce work at a quicker pace to fulfil the wishes of those in her family and the art world encouraging her to increase her output.[6] However, Minnie Pwerle's works were not the central focus of the exhibition.

Two weeks before Emily Kngwarreye had passed away she had painted works that differed from her previous canvases. As she had aged, Kngwarreye's work became highly abstract and her naturalistic approach to depicting the land, and the food it provided, was minimalised. Using a thick primer brush, she had covered each of 24 canvases, varying in sizes, with blocks of colour in strong pastel hues laid down in a loose, deceptively simple composition. After her death these paintings were placed in storage at Dacou Gallery and in 2003, seven years later, *Minimal Fuss* was the occasion of the first Queensland public viewing of some of these works.

The pre-publicity for this showing made much of the enormity of one of the paintings. Measuring almost two metres by three metres, the key work in the exhibition was promoted as the 'million-dollar painting' and the fact that it was painted at the end of the famed artist's life linked it to a particular moment in the narrative of art history. Rarity, size and provenance gave the proposed astronomical value of one million dollars to this painting by an artist who had ceased being able to produce.[7]

To complement these works the paintings of Tony Tuckson (1921–1973) were also exhibited. Tuckson, born in Egypt to British parents, had begun training in England, as an artist, before the Second World War. Demobilised in Australia, he returned to practising his art and in 1949, a year before becoming the Assistant Director of the National Art Gallery of New South Wales, he was impressed by a Sydney exhibition of a collection of Aboriginal artefacts from Arnhem Land. His interest in Aboriginal objects as art persisted and later, as the Deputy Director of the Art Gallery of

New South Wales from 1957, he began to collaborate with the orthopaedic surgeon and art patron Stuart Scougall in expeditions to collect Australian Indigenous art. Consecutively, in 1958 and 1959, Tuckson undertook field trips to northern Australia and the works gathered formed the basis of the Aboriginal art collection of the state gallery in Sydney. From this material, a large exhibition of 115 sacred and secular objects, mainly paintings and sculptures, toured all state galleries between 1960 and 1961. Out of this touring exhibition arose the book *Australian Aboriginal Art*, edited by Ronald Berndt (1964), which comprised six contributors, one of whom was Tuckson.

Concentration of the display of the Arnhem Land material collected by Tuckson was not on ethnographic distinction of authentic Aboriginality; rather, the focus was on the aesthetic impact and art historical positioning of the objects being shown. The sensual qualities of the exhibited objects and the use of line were aspects of Aboriginal art that Tuckson appreciated and this influenced his own art practice (Sayers 2001:192). During collecting expeditions he had taken copious notes to record the public meanings embedded in the paintings and the manner in which they had been executed. His ideas about abstract expressionism and the abstraction he observed in the lines of representation that covered the bark and wood works from Arnhem Land shaped Tuckson's understanding about the aesthetics of Aboriginal art. Through the ideas he formed and the way in which he began to exhibit the art, Tuckson was credited with shifting Australia's perception of Aboriginal art; 'Whereas it had been exhibited as ethnographica in natural history museums, he gave it the status of fine art' (Thomas 2002:418).[8]

The confluence of these three artists, Kngwarreye, Pwerle and Tuckson, in the *Minimal Fuss* exhibition was a serious interrelation of canonical works with newer paintings to create and consolidate the reputations and value of the art, artists and gallery. Just prior to the *Minimal Fuss* exhibition, a marketer had been engaged by Fire-Works to promote the stock in a more aggressively focused and financial manner. This marketer had a personal interest in the sale of Kngwarreye's 'million dollar painting' as he had previously bought some of this artist's work. Arguably, a rise in the interest in and price of this artist's work would prove helpful for the value of his own investment. But value shifts in the art world are subtly realised and I have found during my fieldwork that art resists value increase if treated only as a commodity investment that returns purely financial gain.

Through art historical discourse regarding minimalist style, *Minimal Fuss* linked the work of Australia's principal abstract expressionist,[9] Tuckson, to the work of Emily Kngwarreye and Minnie Pwerle. These artists shared a tradition of mark making. In the opening speech, delivered by the gallery's manager, the theme of a specialised art discourse was taken further. The manager intimated that, to the audience, art is ultimately unfathomable and 'the public is superfluous, galleries are for artists'. Hence the speaker expressed an attitude that placed the art at a distance from the public and created some difficulty of access. This difficulty required the expert intervention of

artists and gallery owners working on the part of the viewing public so that the audience could be granted appropriate guidance and translation as a way of connecting with the art. During this speech the manager gave further consideration to this perspective, that the works could be characterised as so obtuse by the public that the specialised and 'educated' reader was needed so that a suitably informed response could be given on viewing.

By being capable of putting on such a show as *Minimal Fuss*, Fire-Works Gallery demonstrated that as a dealership it was in possession of the people with knowledge and skills needed to supply a specialised understanding of the art. The reputation of Fire-Works as a fine art gallery was potentially enhanced by the elitist tone of the exhibition. Placed in juxtaposition with the Tuckson works, the Utopian women's art was being compared to and linked with the elite reputation of the premier abstract expressionist in Australian art history. Similarly, Tuckson's continuing interest in Aboriginal art throughout his career as artist and administrator was pointedly engaged in this exhibition and Aboriginal art was granted a place alongside non-Indigenous work already legitimised by art critics and historians. Rather than being given a place in the gallery as separate to non-Indigenous fine art, the barriers forming the category of Aboriginal art were being challenged. Debates about changes in style and context from 'traditional' Aboriginal cultural expression and the authenticity of contemporary Indigenous painting practice were raised by the juxtaposition of these artists and their latest pieces. The minimalising of designs and composition was linked to experiments in painting practice validated in the discourses of art history and theory, within discussions about the logic of abstract expressionism. The ability of the gallery to access such works, and give them coherence in the terms of art history, enhanced the dealership's reputation as a location where fine art could be found and its complexity as art understood. The juxtaposition of the particular artists further established the reputations of the individual Indigenous producers and, by extension, the reputation of Aboriginal art as a category. Through this exhibition the dealership sought to validate the contemporary experimentation undertaken by Indigenous artists throughout Australia.

The structuring and execution of *Minimal Fuss* was also a challenge to the restrictive standards of authenticity that placed criteria of tradition on artists who are producing for a current market. Experimentation and the emergence of new styles belied anxiety that Aboriginal art practices would cease to be perpetuated as older artists passed away. Younger artists from diverse regions linked themselves to this Indigenous tradition through social, historical and cultural ties but also claimed contemporary Aboriginal art practice to traditions of aesthetics and art history that were commonly assumed to be non-Indigenous. Through the grouping and presentation of the art as shown by the exhibition *Minimal Fuss*, Fire-Works Gallery was complicit in the social process of the creation and maintenance of shifting reputations within the category of Aboriginal art, as well as the reputations of the gallery and exhibited artists.

Relationships between objects can influence the reputation of the gallery and dealer and increase the valuation of artworks. Structured exhibitions like *Minimal Fuss* create networks of relationships between other galleries and canonical artworks that can subsequently influence the reputation of the dealership. Contestations over reputation are political in that success in the trade comes as people and art objects are delicately and strategically linked together in partnerships. Valuations of partnerships between objects and people rely on reputations, knowledge and display, which are enacted through social process and interaction.

Conclusion

The Aboriginal art market has developed and continues to operate with variable Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaboration. Valuation in the commoditisation of Aboriginal art is a contested field in which the dealer, artists and buyers enter into struggles over the construction and evaluation of cultural categories, as well as the worth of art objects and themselves. On the basis of the research I undertook at Fire-Works, I contend that the value of Aboriginal art objects is not only shaped by hegemonic discourses and institutions. Localised, communal and personal influences and motivations enacted in social interaction between objects, dealers, artists and buyers also inform the value of art objects and other material representations of Aboriginal culture.

In particular, I found that through the dealer's relationships, negotiations between market and communally held values presented challenges to ways in which Aboriginal art and material culture are represented and received. Responses to the commoditisation of Aboriginal art range from characterisations of exploitation and appropriation to the view that non-Indigenous consumption offers potential opportunities for the strengthening of Aboriginal culture. While there is some possible truth in each of these assessments, I have argued that the commoditisation of Aboriginal art is more complex than this dichotomy suggests.

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Notes

1. Fire-Works Gallery grew out of an artists' co-operative, the Campfire Group. Founding members and consequent directors of the gallery had and continue to have an agenda

of creating dialogue between Black and White Australians. For a comprehensive history, see Eather (ed.) 2005.

2. In his 2002 exhibition, *Aboriginal Art — It's a White Thing*, artist Richard Bell included a 'theorem' in which he accused the art world of manipulating and exploiting Aboriginal art and artists. Bell continues to produce controversial and politically provocative works to protest the appropriation of Aboriginal resources and culture.

3. I draw on the terminology 'politics of value' utilised by Appadurai (1986).

4. Michael Eather's collaboration in the major exhibition *Balance 1990: Views, Visions, Influences*, at the Queensland Art Gallery, established his place as an important and controversial figure in the local Brisbane art world and Indigenous affairs. Fire-Works Gallery, of which Eather is a driving force and key director, grew out of complex collaborations between White and Aboriginal artists who made art that commented on issues of Indigenous affairs in contemporary Australia.

5. Acting as the art co-ordinator at Papunya Tula in the 1970s, Andrew Crocker encouraged wealthy collectors to buy Aboriginal art. One of the most influential of these buyers was Robert Holmes à Court, a high-profile businessman from Western Australia. His purchases from Papunya were included in articles in *Vogue* magazine and major newspapers. After this publicity art from Papunya became a more desirable commodity (see McCulloch 2001:31, 32).

6. In a conversation with a dealer located in Alice Springs I was told that this was a common scenario experienced by successful artists.

7. The death of an artist signals the closure of an oeuvre, when no other art piece will be added to the work undertaken. It is not unusual that artwork becomes more expensive because of the finite quality and sense of rarity that the demise of the artist magnifies.

8. See Morphy 2001 for a discussion regarding the issues that arose from the inclusion of Aboriginal art into the aesthetic realm in the late 1950s. Howard Morphy examines the debate between Tony Tuckson and Ronald Berndt about how Aboriginal art should be exhibited, appreciated and understood.

9. 'Abstract expressionism' is the label applied to a dominant movement in painting in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s and is characterised by a desire to convey emotions through the sensual qualities of paint. Emphasis is placed on surface qualities of the art and the act of painting itself (Anfam 2004; Balken c.2005; Chilvers 2003:4; Landau 2005; Mercer 2006).

Chapter 3

Possum skin cloaks as a vehicle for healing in Aboriginal communities in the south-east of Australia

Vicki Couzens and Lee Darroch

This paper is dedicated to the Elders who have supported us on our possum skin cloak journey of healing: Uncle Ivan Couzens, Uncle Henry Atkinson, Uncle Alf 'Boydie' Turner, Aunty Joy Murphy-Wandin and Aunty Matilda House. Thank you always for your wisdom, support and strength.

Abstract: *The possum skin cloak journey of healing started in Victoria with a small group of Aboriginal women who are artists. It is now spreading across the south-east of Australia, reuniting people with possum skin cloaks, stories, culture and place. The women aim to take possum skin cloaks across more south-eastern communities and connect communities with their historical incised cloaks from the 1800s held in overseas museums.*

Introduction

There are three parts to our story:
- where we have been
- where we are going
- how we will get there.

In south-eastern Australia possum skin cloaks are one of our most sacred cultural expressions as Aboriginal people. Cloaks link us to both our Ancestors, who have gone before us, and to the Land, which we are the Keepers of.

The traditional process of cloak-making was very labour intensive. Aboriginal men hunted possums by cutting toe holds with an axe in a tree where possums lived. A smoky fire was lit at the base of the tree and the possums were smoked out of the tree holes where they lived. They were then clubbed and killed. The meat was eaten

Figure 1: Lee Darroch in Echuca Biganga cloak, 2010. Photograph David Clark

and the skins were stretched out on sheets of bark using hardwood pegs and then laid by a smoky fire in full sun. The fire, smoke and sun cured or tanned the skins until they were as hard as a board. They were then incised with sharp shells or stones in a pattern to make them pliable enough to wear. Adults and children wore possum skin cloaks with incised marks that denoted clan, tribe, cultural sites and the maker's mark. Sometimes ochre was painted on.

Traditionally, cloaks had many uses. Babies were born and wrapped in possum skin cloaks. Cloaks kept us warm and dry. Possum skin cloaks were worn in ceremonies. Women beat possum skin cloaks as drums during corroboree. Finally, when we died 'we were wrapped in our Country' as the cloaks were put over us.

Today there are only seven of the historical incised possum skin cloaks from the 1800s left in the world. Two are in Australia in the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Centre at the Melbourne Museum and the other five are overseas. The five overseas cloaks

are held in the Smithsonian Institution in the United States, the Pigorini Museum in Italy (two cloaks), the British Museum in the United Kingdom and the Berlin Anthropological Museum in Germany.

In 1999 Vicki Couzens and Lee Darroch joined 11 other Aboriginal artists to view the traditional Lake Condah cloak in the underground storage of the Melbourne Museum. The cloak was taken out of its box for all of us to see. It was a deeply emotional and spiritual experience. The cloak is from Vicki's grandmother's Country. Vicki and Lee felt the presence of the Ancestors or Old People in the room with us. They have been with us ever since.

It was from this experience that our journey began. Vicki and her sister, Debra, asked permission from their father, Uncle Ivan Couzens, to remake the Lake Condah cloak as it is very old and fragile. Treahna Hamm and Lee Darroch asked permission from the Yorta Yorta Council of Elders. Both Uncle Ivan Couzens and Uncle Alf 'Boydie' Turner supported Lee and Treahna to remake the Yorta Yorta cloak, which was collected from Maiden's Punt (Echuca) in 1853. The Yorta Yorta cloak has a large rip in it and is very, very fragile. We wanted our children's children to see the cloaks and know about their rich cultural tradition.

In order to remake the cloaks we had to update the technology, remembering that we are a part of the oldest *living* culture in the world and that cultural practices evolve and adapt over time. Many changes were needed to remake the cloaks. To begin with, possums are a protected species in Australia and cannot be hunted. Instead, we sourced our possum skins from Maori hunters in Aotearoa, where possums are an introduced species from Australia, and with no known predators they have reached plague proportions. There were 70 million possums in Aotearoa at the last estimate.

These adoptions necessitated another adaptation. As the skins had been chemically tanned for export they were too soft to be incised with sharp tools in the traditional way. Treahna remembered a kangaroo skin cloak that Aunty Nola Kerr had made, which was in the Koorie Heritage Trust. This kangaroo cloak had the designs burned into the skins with a poker work burner.

The next development was when we attempted to source kangaroo sinew and bone awls to stitch the possum skins up with. We found it was not only hard to come by kangaroo tails but that they required chewing first. Lee spoke to her boat-building husband, David, and borrowed his sail-maker's needles and waxed thread for the sewing. The cloaks were sewn with sail-maker's needles and waxed thread, the designs were burned in with a poker work burner and finally some ochre was painted on some panels as it had been in the original cloaks. The whole process took many months of largely trial and error and innovation.

The two cloaks and supporting material were exhibited in 2001 in the *Tooloyn Koortakay (Squaring skins for rugs)* exhibition at Melbourne Museum. This collection was acquired by the National Museum of Australia in 2003. In 2004 the *Tooloyn Koortakay* exhibition opened in the Gallery of First Australians to represent Victorian

Aboriginal culture. Part of the journey is told in the book that Vicki, Debra, Treahna and Lee wrote in 2005 with Amanda Reynolds, the then curator at the National Museum of Australia, entitled *Wrapped in a Possum Skin Cloak: The Tooloyn Koortakay Collection in the National Museum of Australia*.

There have been many other steps in our story. A significant step was the Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony in Melbourne in 2006. Part of the vision is to share the knowledge and teach cloak-making. In 2006 Treahna Hamm, Maree Clarke, Vicki Couzens and Lee Darroch worked with the Aboriginal Advisory Committee (headed by Uncle Kevin Coombes) to the Commonwealth Games and with Regional Arts Victoria across 36 of the 37 language groups of Victoria teaching cloak-making to hundreds of Elders, artists and community members. The cloaks told each mob's story — creation story, family story, story of cultural sites and history. The 36 cloaks were worn by 36 Elders or community representatives in the Opening Ceremony. These cloaks have now gone back to Country and are kept in local Keeping Places, museums and Aboriginal co-operatives.

Figure 2: Yinalung Yenu cloak by Vicki Couzens and Lee Darroch, 2008. Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. Photograph Lee Darroch

Cloaks today

Today cloaks are a vehicle for:
* healing
* bringing back self-respect
* reconnecting to cultural sites, creation stories and the Land.

Cloaks are now on the move and they are spreading throughout the Land, reclaiming their Country and their people. In the words of two of the wise Elders who have supported us on this journey, Uncle Henry Atkinson said, 'You women are continuing a cultural tradition', and Uncle Ivan Couzens told us, 'I never knew the power of the cloak until I put one on'.

Figure 3: Aunty Matilda House and Lee Darroch in Festival of Pacific Arts Cloak, 2009. Photograph Elena Green

Other Elders have commented on the healing powers of the cloak. For example, Aunty Phoebe Nicholson wants to make a cloak specifically to use for healing and Aunty Mavis seemed to be 'better in herself' after wearing the cloak.

The cloaks are on the move. We now want to show other interstate mobs how to make a possum skin cloak. We are initially focusing on those areas that have historical possum skin cloaks from the 1800s held in overseas museums. Our aim is to show all the different groups in an area where a cloak was collected from how to make a cloak. This process has begun in New South Wales around the Hunter Valley and Lake Macquarie, where the cloak in the Smithsonian Institution is from. We have also assisted the Ngambri people of Canberra to make cloaks for the many ceremonies they are called upon to perform. We plan to return to the Hunter Valley and then go to the Lower Murray River area.

We are planning an international possum skin cloak exhibition overseas tour. Initially, we hope to take our possum skin cloaks and accompanying support material to Aotearoa to pay due respect to the fact that our possum skins come from Aotearoa and to acknowledge the strong Maori cloak-making tradition. We then plan to exhibit at each of the museums with historical cloaks: in Italy, the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom. In 2011 we created a contemporary multi-channel film to tour to the Berlin Culture Museum, Cambridge Museum and the Koorie Heritage Trust in Australia. Our cloaks will go worldwide then…

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Chapter 4

Beyond the didjeridu: The representation of Aboriginality in the music of a selection of Australian films (1971 to 2002)

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Abstract: *Through an analysis of a small number of Australian film scores, this paper discusses musical stereotypes applied in the representation of Aboriginal culture. Comparing the films of Indigenous and non-Indigenous directors, the paper explores dichotomies of indigeneity/non-indigeneity, urban/rural locations and historical/contemporaneous settings. The stance of the didjeridu as a primary signifier of Aboriginality in film music is interrogated, and alternative methods of musical representation explored. This paper serves as an introduction to a larger study looking at the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in the music of Australian films. The paper compares a number of films directed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous directors made since 1971, discussing the use of music to represent culture. Although the small sampling presented here cannot provide overarching conclusions, some trends emerge in the representation of culture through film music.*

Introduction

Various methods have been employed in Australian film music to represent cultural groups. An examination and evaluation of some of these methods will serve to inform future filmmakers to allow them to make effective use of music. Identifying stereotypes in Australian popular media assists and encourages media creators to go beyond any simplistic non-inclusive representation and avoid unintended reception by different audiences.

In this study, a number of terms commonly used in music and film theory are introduced. Where the terms appear in the text, the reader is referred to explanatory notes for definitions.

The terms 'aboriginality' and 'indigeneity' are loaded with meaning, and it is necessary to avoid considering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as one homogeneous group. One commonly recurring stereotype in creative media is the use of didjeridu as a musical trope to represent all Australian Indigenous people, despite the instrument's traditional use being constrained to a relatively small part of the Australian continent. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (2004:94) considers such rigid, homogeneous representation to be part of the discourse of colonialism:

> An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated.

Marcia Langton (1993:27) warns us to avoid making 'the assumption of the undifferentiated "Other". More specifically, the assumption…that all Aborigines are alike and equally understand each other, without regard to cultural variation, history, gender, sexual preference, and so on.'

Similarly, what constitutes 'the West' as a cultural concept is far from obvious, and the use of such terms helps reinforce notions of cultural dichotomy rather than representing the continuous spectra of cultural interaction that would be closer to the reality of contemporary Australia. Nevertheless, until only recently, the industry apparatus of film-making in this country has been controlled by the predominantly Anglo-European settler society that saw itself in opposition to the culture of the Indigenous people of the continent of Australia and its surrounding islands. The narrative processes used in film-making have almost exclusively been drawn from that perspective.

Similar studies overseas?

My interest in this topic was sparked by a paper presented by Claudia Gorbman (currently Professor of Film Studies at the University of Washington, Tacoma) at the 1999 Cinesonic conference in Melbourne. Gorbman demonstrated the changing representation of indigenous North American culture in the music of films over a period dating from before the Second World War up to the 1990s, showing a clear progression from a stereotype-laden idealised music performed by Western orchestras in films such as *Stagecoach* (dir. John Ford, 1939) to a more *social realist* representation in Ry Cooder's score to *Geronimo: An American legend* (dir. Walter Hill, 1993)

(Gorbman 2000). Gorbman's presentation incited me to consider how Australian film music has represented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people — whether musical stereotypes are evident in the music of Australian films, and how these may have changed over the history of film-making in Australia.

Although extensive research has been conducted in other colonised countries on the representation of cultural groups in film music, no comprehensive analysis has been done in Australia. Until recently, film music in Australia had not attracted the level of research attention found for other aspects of film production, and very few scholars discuss cultural representation in film music. However, two books of essays on film music edited by Rebecca Coyle (1998, 2005) point to a growing engagement in film music research, including the representation of culture in Australian film music.

Representation of culture in film music

Within the confined time scale of the feature-length film, stereotypes are often employed to tell part of the story, effectively taking shortcuts in the storytelling process. As part of a continuum of storytelling, dating back to the beginnings of language, film has employed cultural stereotypes relying on pre-established representations of cultures outside the range of experience of the intended audience. These can be based on misunderstandings, pure fiction, or real experience tempered with 'dramatic licence'. More importantly, stereotypes can create their own reality through repeated iteration or, indeed, as Bhabha notes above, stereotypes rely on repetition for their very existence.

The influence of music in the narrative of a film is subtle, hidden or 'unheard' (Gorbman 1987:3), rendering its impact potentially more powerful than the images. Music is fundamentally abstract — there can be no true 'absolutes' in music (Chua 1999:6) because there is no immanent self-referential element of music that can be said to communicate the same meaning for all listeners. This is not to say that music is not capable of signification. Indeed, through repetition and association, music carries much personal and societal meaning. Musical stereotypes can take the form of particular melodies, rhythms, harmonies, textures, instrumental colours or combinations of these factors. By repetition and context, they gain associated meaning. Yet human experience of these stereotypes is not universal. For example, the melody for the song *Happy Birthday* is known by a significant proportion of the world's population, yet there is nothing inherent in the particular confluence of melodic intervals, rhythms or phrases that makes it more suitable to represent a birthday than any other melody, or that carries a universal meaning for 'birthday'.

Musical stereotypes can be used to quickly set up expectations or set a scene: the sound of a nursery rhyme could imply the simplicity or innocence of a character, or an anthem or vernacular song could signify nationality. Much of this signification can be lost or misinterpreted when the music is heard outside its proper cultural milieu.

Music can thus be used to carry hidden messages directed towards segments of an audience, or to establish a time, place or situation, for the purpose of irony or nostalgia, or simply to establish an *affiliating identification*[1] with a sector of the audience. Conversely, if alternative 'meanings' of a piece of music are not considered or understood when applying them within a narrative, there is the risk of unintended emotional responses ranging from amusement, confusion or even deep insult, thus distracting the spectator from engaging with the film in the way intended by the filmmakers.

To strengthen the cohesion between the narrative and musical elements in his dramatic operas, Richard Wagner developed the technique of *leitmotif*, creating specific melodies to represent characters, objects, places, emotions and situations — thus establishing his own sets of musical stereotypes. The use of leitmotif became an important narrative technique in the musical score to Hollywood films from the earliest sound films and remains so today. The technique succeeds only through multiple repetitions within the duration of the opera or film, but can very efficiently convey the 'sub-narrative' of a scene — the unspoken story that describes what a character is thinking or feeling.

The musical scores of early Hollywood sound films were rife with purpose-written leitmotifs and 'well-worn clichés' (Flinn 1992:7), especially in the representation of cultural groups. Mark Slobin (2008:3) has identified a number of factors commonly evident in the representation of the 'primitive Other' in these early films:

- the use of symphony orchestra as an icon of cultural superiority and sophistication
- constant drum beats, especially in a four-beat pattern, irrespective of their appropriateness to the culture represented
- pentatonic[2] (simple five-note) scales evoking a simplified and unsophisticated melodic sense
- the use of chromaticism[3] to evoke the feminine, mysterious or malicious
- the stereotypical use of instrumental tone colours to represent particular emotions, character archetypes or situations.

Caryl Flinn (1992:4) describes how the use of orchestra in film serves a 'utopian' function in these 'classic-era' Hollywood films by reinforcing a nationalist ideology through the use of nostalgia. Slobin (2008:12) points to the use of orchestra, with its hierarchical structure and controlled expression, as evoking 'a value system that overarches national economic, demographic, and ideological divides'. The strange is normalised through the process of rendering by the orchestra — made acceptable to a Western audience — the music of 'the Other' becoming acceptable or legitimised through a filtering process. Kassabian (2001:2) describes the process thus:

> Composed scores, most often associated with classical Hollywood scoring traditions, condition what I call *assimilating identifications*. Such paths are structured to draw perceivers into socially and historically unfamiliar positions, as do larger scale processes of assimilation. When an offer of assimilating identification

is (unconsciously) accepted, perceivers can easily find themselves positioned anywhere — sledding down the Himalayas, for instance — and with anyone… Scores that offer assimilating identifications, I argue, try to maintain fairly rigid control over such processes, even as — or because — they encourage unlikely identifications.

And further (Kassabian 2001:58):

'One time' dramatic scoring serves composers as a common tactic for signalling or reinforcing 'exotic' geographic locations…In this way, perceivers are addressed as members of the dominant musical culture.

Australia has never been part of the 'studio system' as such. Our audience base is tiny compared to that of countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. In the 1930s the heavy licensing costs associated with the new sound technology for film and the economic downturn caused by the Great Depression, and the economic strain in the 1940s caused by participation in the Second World War, greatly hampered film production in Australia. In fact, only in the past three decades has Australia been able to match the number of films produced in the first two decades of the twentieth century. As a result of these financial issues, many of the feature films shot in Australia in the period from 1930 to 1970 were financed and produced by overseas companies. Nevertheless, up to the 1960s the music of Australian films was dominated by the orchestral model of classic Hollywood. Australian films, whether local or overseas productions, have generally attempted to follow the production methods of those larger markets overseas within the bounds of significantly fewer financial resources.

The Jindyworobaks and the search for a unique Australian 'voice'

During the period from around 1940 to 1960, art music composition in Australia came under the influence of the 'Jindyworobak' movement, which flourished in the field of literature. It has been described as 'the attempt by various composers to establish a uniquely Australian identity through the evocation of the Australian landscape and environment and through the use of Aboriginal elements, in their music' (Symons 2002:33).

Although the Jindyworobak composers drew influence from Aboriginal stories, beliefs, language and songs, these concepts were filtered through idealised and idyllic notions of the 'noble savage'. A similar art movement had developed in North America through the latter half of the nineteenth century in which the indigenous peoples were usually presented thus: 'the…"savage" usually appeared as a character of naïve

temperament, who…still roamed in an unpolluted romantic landscape, a "child of nature" whose uncivilised way of life could be sentimentalised' (Pisani 2005:81).

Whereas American romanticism was born of a fascination for 'primitive' peoples in a time when Europe was still ruled by empires, the Jindyworobak movement in Australia was born of nationalist fervour after Federation in 1901, and most particularly from Australia's participation in the First World War. The dominant artistic *zeitgeist* sought a unique Australian mode of expression within European forms of creative production. Writing in 1924, composer Henry Tate (1873–1926; quoted in Mercer 2005:23) suggested to his fellow composers, 'Aboriginal music is surprisingly interesting. Wild and barbaric as much of it sounds, it is rich in rhythms and themes, that, once annotated and fixed, will supply a copious reservoir of melodic germs and rhythmical fragments of the type that composers all over the world are continually seeking.'

Despite Tate's pronouncement, and the professed eagerness of the Jindyworobak composers to seek a unique Australian 'voice', until quite recently there had been only a limited assimilation of elements of traditional Aboriginal music into concert (and film) music. Those melodies that have been incorporated have passed through a filtering process, forcing the notes and rhythms to conform to Western idioms, rendering them playable by Western orchestral instruments and suitable for Western ears.[4] The intervals between the notes for traditional Aboriginal song, disregarding the influence of European music, are not the same as are found on a Western instrument such as a piano.

Covell (1967:87) declares Jindyworobakism to be 'an article of faith rather than a matter of rational deduction: and its significance is not measurable by logic, but by the power of belief'. For Covell (1967:87), Jindyworobakism demonstrates an assimilation in principle, rather than in fact — against which he admonishes, 'There are no obvious reasons why Australian musicians of exclusively European training and background should attempt to synthesise Aboriginal musical idioms and their own in a new way'.

Because of the dearth of films produced in Australia in the period up to 1971 dealing with Aboriginal characters or stories, there has been less opportunity for musical archetypes to develop to offer universal signification of Aboriginality in the way that is clearly demonstrated in North America. The stereotypes used to represent indigenous peoples of North America are well defined and well known from the genre of the Western — techniques such as the use of parallel fourths or fifths over a minor pentatonic melody, underlaid by constant four-beat tom-toms (Pisani 2005:288) — the parameters defined by Slobin (2008:3).

In writing for film or for the concert stage, the Jindyworobak composers chose instrumentation drawn from the Western orchestra. John Antill's ballet suite *Corroboree*, first performed in 1946 and perhaps one of the best known works of this period, was rendered in textures reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* by a standard orchestra with a supplemented percussion section — in effect, an *impression* of a traditional

Aboriginal ceremony without direct reference, melodically or instrumentally, to the signified ceremony. There are few examples of concert works or film scores from before the 1960s that incorporate traditional Indigenous instruments into Western instrumental ensembles.

One traditional musical instrument of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin has, however, captured the imagination of a widespread international audience — the didjeridu. Since the early 1970s the didjeridu has come to be used widely in popular media to represent all mainland Aboriginal peoples or cultures in songs, film and concert works. However, the original, traditional use of the instrument was confined to the northernmost parts of the mainland — from East Arnhem Land across the Kimberley Ranges in the north of Western Australia. The instrument has different names and playing styles in the different traditional lands across the region (Stubington 2007:57). Mandawuy Yunupiŋu (1997:vii), a Yolŋu man from East Arnhem Land and internationally renowned performer and songwriter, describes the instrument's sacred origins and its acquired iconic status:

> The Yidaki (didjeridu) comes from northeast Arnhem Land and was originally played only in Australia's Top End. Yolŋu understand the Yidaki has become an Australian icon and accept that non-Yolŋu people throughout the world now use it for informal purposes and enjoyment. Be aware, however, that its origins are sacred and secret to Yolŋu men. Those stories cannot be told here, can only be shared with initiated men.

Yunupiŋu indicates an acceptance of the use of the instrument beyond its traditional borders. But overuse of the instrument as a symbol to represent all Aboriginal people, irrespective of where they come from, is a stereotype. Michael Vincent Pisani (2005:332), discussing representation of the First Nations people of North America, writes:

> Censoring a stereotype — even one based in sound — does not make it disappear. But putting a frame around it, consciously acknowledging its borders, and addressing its history at least helps us to understand why such stereotypes exist in the first place, and perhaps even to recognise, when we next encounter them, their effects on us and on society as a whole.

A sampling of Australian film music

I now look at a small number of Australian films to analyse the practices employed in representation in the film score. Although this is not an exhaustive sampling or even a genuinely representative one, some interesting comparisons can be made. The films selected were produced in the period from 1971 to 2002. Both Indigenous and

non-Indigenous films are discussed to determine if identifiably different approaches have been taken in the use of music for the representation of culture. It should be noted that although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been involved in the film-making process in Australia since the inception of the industry more than 100 years ago, it is only in recent decades that they have assumed creative control of film productions, taking on 'above the line' production roles such as director, producer, scriptwriter, composer and so on.

Non-Indigenous productions

Walkabout

The film *Walkabout* (1971) presents both the landscape and an Aboriginal character (given as Black Boy), played by David Gulpilil, as wild, beautiful, sensual but with a gaze that is most definitely situated outside of Aboriginal culture. The English director Nicolas Roeg and English composer John Barry, voicing through the persons of two English children, dominate the point of view, subjecting the landscape and Black Boy to the scrutiny of the colonist. Gulpilil's character takes on the archetypal role of 'tracker', leading the two lost children to safety out of the desert. The 'tracker' character appears in a number of Australian films before and since 1971, yet this is the first film to present the archetype as more than just an adjunct to a non-Aboriginal person. Only four years earlier, the film *Journey Out of Darkness* (1967), directed by James Trainor, had featured non-Indigenous actor Ed Devereaux in black-face playing a 'black tracker', searching for an Aboriginal fugitive played by Kamahl, a Malaysian performer of Sri Lankan extraction.

In *Walkabout,* the Girl (Jenny Agutter) is drawn to the physicality of the young Black Boy, but seems inescapably constrained within her upbringing, finally rejecting him and suppressing her own desires. The young White Boy (Lucien Roeg), on the other hand, is much more open to communication with Gulpilil's character, learning words of his language and partaking in his hunting activities.

Gregory Stephens (2009) describes the range of symbols used in the film to highlight the discontinuity between the two cultures. He points to the importance that 'radio' plays throughout in functioning much like a 'Greek Chorus'[5] and commenting wryly on the action (a device I revisit in discussing Rolf de Heer's film *The Tracker*). Several examples are given, such as the counterpointing of images of the confinement of modern apartment living and the father's drinking, with a radio description of the preparation of a French delicacy based on the sparrow-like Ortolan, in which the bird is trapped in a dark box and force fed grain until it can no longer stand, then drowned in cognac, cooked in an oven and then eaten whole.

Film theorist and musician Michael O'Shaughnessy gives an account of the various sound and music elements used in the film to project notions of cultural assimilation

or disjuncture. He discusses the main musical theme, composed by John Barry, which is heard several times in the film. This nostalgic theme seems to spring from a utopian reading of the 'primitive', untainted country through which the children pass. The theme features most prominently in a scene where the Girl swims naked in a beautiful waterhole, intercut with scenes of Black Boy hunting animals with White Boy — the visceral and the erotic creating a disturbing conjunction. This theme, played by dreamy strings and winds accompanied by harpsichord, is described by O'Shaughnessy (2004:85) as 'the primary melody through which to feel and understand the landscape, the characters and the story'. But the viewpoint is firmly European — full of nostalgic melancholy. The music serves to 'ameliorate the social existence it allegedly overrides, and offers, in one form or another, the sense of something better. [It] extends an impression of perfection and integrity in an otherwise imperfect, unintegrated world' (Flinn 1992:8).

Walkabout opens with scenes of the city, but we hear the sound of the didjeridu and clap sticks, interspersed with sections of Karlheinz Stockhausen's electro-acoustic piece *Hymnen*, principally radio noise and speech in a range of European languages. Thus the sense of cultural disconnection that is the core idea of the film is emphasised from the very beginning. The use of didjeridu locates the film for the listener in Australia, even though we only see a nameless cityscape. It cannot be said that the use of didjeridu is used to represent the character of Black Boy — we have not yet been introduced to any of the characters. In fact, only in a couple of moments in the film do we hear music that is of Black Boy's perspective, highlighting the fact that the point of view for the film is principally that of the Girl and White Boy — or perhaps a non-Indigenous spectator.

During a dance performed by Black Boy, once he had completed his assumed task of delivering the children back to civilisation, a didjeridu is heard, although we never see a didjeridu player. It was the intention of the director that the dance be received as a courtship dance. Stephens (2009) considers it more plausible that Gulpilil responded to the scenes of death and devastation wrought by a group of hunters who kill purely for sport, as well as the frustration of not being able to establish a connection with the Girl: 'In context, it seems more convincing to call it a dance of death than some sort of self-defeating courtship'. In the sequence, the nostalgic utopian theme subsumes the sound of the didjeridu — gently, yet firmly, suppressing it. At the end of the film, in a daydream, the Girl imagines being back at the waterhole with White Boy and Black Boy, all naked, and seemingly functioning as a family unit, despite the fact that she had paid Black Boy so little attention in real life. The music we hear is the melancholy theme played by strings and harpsichord. It is the nostalgic theme that supports the images, drawing the (non-Indigenous) audience into the nostalgic, utopian vision.

Films such as *Walkabout* incorporating Aboriginal stories and/or characters, whether by Indigenous or non-Indigenous directors, have predominantly had historical and/or non-urban settings. Some commentators point to a preference for funding

bodies to support stories that place their characters at a comfortable distance from the (mainstream) audience, in remote places and/or in historical time — a 'colonialist' view of how Aboriginal people should appear in film.[6] McFarlane (2003:60) explains the situation thus:

> when Aboriginals had any kind of presence in Australian films, they were there, as often as not, as exotics, as Nature-oriented counterpoints to 'civilised' white man, and in stories in which 'a protagonist is privileged and the character is psychologised…in keeping with the imperatives of classical Hollywood cinema'.[7]

Although *Walkabout* was followed by a small number of other feature films in the 1970s that included Aboriginal characters and stories, one film in particular would cause filmmakers to tread carefully. Despite an extensive marketing campaign, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), a film which featured a strong Aboriginal character whose rebellion against oppression led to an extended series of murders, was a failure at the box office. As a result, for some years there was a general reluctance to put resources into any films that included Aboriginal stories — it was hard to procure funding for an Indigenous story in film, which left filmmakers reluctant to take on such projects.[8]

Racism is one of the subjects that has hardly had serious treatment in new Australian cinema, except in the small-budget 'art cinema' in which directors such as Tracey Moffatt have worked, finding critical acclaim sometimes but not audiences of a size to make serious impact. Perhaps the commercial failure of Fred Schepisi's fine film version of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* helps explain filmmakers' unwillingness to address this most appalling stain on the national conscience (McFarlane 2003:60).

The ball was (metaphorically) picked up in a big way in the year 2002, which saw an unprecedented number of new films released on Aboriginal subjects.

Rabbit-Proof Fence

Released in 2002, the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, directed by Phillip Noyce, is based on the memoirs of Doris Pilkington-Garimara, daughter of one of the young girls at the focus of the story. The film is posited as a faithful representation of actual events, and in that regard has left a large impact on many thousands of people around the world who have viewed it. Nevertheless, the film has also been vociferously attacked by people questioning the veracity of the story, accusing the director of freely interpreting the facts.

In creating the score for the film, English composer Peter Gabriel chose to use natural environmental sounds as a core element to ensure that the music would be 'of the place' of the action in the film. The landscape features not only as a visual element in the film, but also in the musical score — the 'sounds of Australia' (Kibby 2005:153):

Sounds of nature are used throughout the film. Leaves rustling, soft animal noises, sounds of cooling stones, earth settling after the heat of the day, and the whisper of water are used not just to create atmosphere, but also to comment on the narrative and underscore viewers' emotional responses.

Natural sounds are given special prominence in the soundscape, the bed of ambient sound underlying other sound elements such as dialogue and music. Of special prominence is the call of the whistling kite, which is the spirit animal that we are told will protect the main character, Molly. The sound is used as a leitmotif to represent family and spirit, and reoccurs at significant moments in the narrative. The environmental sounds are used in their natural state, as well as manipulated electronically. Even when radically changed by slowing down, adding vibrato, or other techniques, the soundscape seems to grow out of the panorama.

Gabriel combines these natural and modified sounds with the music of a broad range of performers and styles from around the world, a process he explored in his score for Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). However, in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* the process is executed with far greater subtlety: 'Gabriel has used mostly instruments and vocal styles that may not be instantly recognizable as belonging to particular contemporary locations or areas but instead might be understood to evoke a timeless space for the Western listener' (Kibby 2005:156).

Both this explanation and Gabriel's hybridisation of source material are problematic, however, implying an equivalence of non-Western musics and the ability for these mixed sources to give a patina of the 'exotic' to the score — exactly the kind of stereotyping we have discussed in conjunction with Hollywood scoring.[9] Such musical hybrids might be acceptable if the music were to be enjoyed for its own sake, but in the context of a film where the music becomes part of the representation of culture the result is not so easily dismissed.

Didjeridu is incorporated as part of the soundscape at various times throughout the film, but features especially prominently in conjunction with the tracker Moodoo (played by David Gulpilil). The didjeridu is used to support the soundscape and to locate the film as being of Australia, but also to draw our attention to Moodoo, who represents the potential threat of recapture for the fleeing girls. If we compare the geographical location of the story (mid to southern Western Australia) with the region of traditional use of the instrument as discussed above (northern Western Australia across to East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory), we must question the use of the instrument. We are told, however, that Moodoo comes from the 'far north'. Does this validate its use?

When we hear the didjeridu in the soundscape to signify the role of Moodoo as tracker, it intrudes into the sonic space. There is no subtlety here, and the effect is both jarring and obvious. At other times in the score, presumably under Gabriel's control, the didjeridu sits as one layer in the soundscape, more sensed than

consciously heard. The music thus serves more to support the narrative than to call attention to itself.

Although there is a small amount of chanting, sometimes with body or stick percussion, as the women mourn and also when they are singing the girls back to country, it seems Gabriel has chosen not so much to represent the music of the people of the story. Instead, the atmospheric soundscape that is the basis of most of the score is perhaps intended to represent the land itself. But the density of the soundtrack is obscured by its static nature and by its placement within the film — again, we sense more than we consciously hear. In sections of minimal dialogue or montage, the soundtrack is allowed space for conscious perception. One such place is in the scene known as 'The return', as the two remaining fugitive girls are on the final part of their journey home. Here, the soundtrack incorporates all the elements described above in a rich multi-layered soundscape.

There are significant differences, then, between the approaches taken in representation in music for *Walkabout* and *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. For both films the music is dominated by 'point of view'. In *Walkabout*, the point of view is of the non-Indigenous children, especially the Girl, and the music places the spectator within a Eurocentric idealised sonic landscape. Yet, for the children, their participation in the actual landscape is predominantly passive, facilitated through the 'child of nature' that is David Gulpilil's character. For *Rabbit-Proof Fence* the point of view is of the fleeing Aboriginal girls undertaking a hero's quest, or perhaps of the Land itself observing their flight. They survive all challenges presented to them on their journey by their wits and knowledge, and through an inherent 'spirit' that drives them on, represented in the soundscape by a range of treated environmental sounds.

The Tracker

Directed by Rolf de Heer and produced in 2002, the same year as *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *The Tracker* is distinguished by a very different approach to the use of music within the narrative of the film. The film incorporates nine songs, with words written by de Heer and music written by long-time collaborator Graham Tardif. These are sung by internationally renowned Aboriginal singer Archie Roach. The songs serve as commentaries on the action and the characters of the film. Thus, the score serves a different purpose to that of most other movies, functioning like the device of the Greek Chorus of ancient drama.

The film presents as an otherwise ordinary 'tracker' story (Probyn 2005:1) — an Aboriginal tracker assists White policemen in the search for a fugitive Aboriginal man (perhaps not so different from *Journey Out of Darkness*) — however, this film establishes itself as an allegorical tale, a fable, through the use of a number of unique approaches.

The Greek Chorus device used in *Walkabout,* consisting of various radio cutaways, served an ironic function acting as comic relief. In *The Tracker*, however, the songs

Figure 1: David Gulpilil in *The Tracker* (2002). Reprinted with permission, Vertigo Productions

serve as an outlet of expression for the characters that appear unable to express themselves in words. Human voice in a film score always draws focus, and its use must be handled sensitively. Michel Chion (1999:49) talks of the narrating voice, the 'I-Voice', occupying its own disembodied space, speaking 'from a point where time is suspended'. For this film, the songs occupy that disembodied space, wielding a strange power to draw us in and hold us captive. We cannot pull ourselves away, and therefore we become receptive vessels for the meaning inherent in the lyrics. The powerful emotion present in Archie Roach's performance intensifies this connection — we are rendered involuntary spectators at a traffic accident.

Unlike *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, this film makes little pretence at telling a true story. French filmmaker/philosopher Guy Debord (2002:9), in analysing the role of mass media in the creation of 'the spectacle', stated that 'in a world that is really upside down, the true is a moment of the false'. To create a story with lasting impact, Rolf de Heer in *The Tracker* has, from the outset, applied several techniques that make the spectator fully aware that what we observe in the film is not reality. Perhaps by doing so, de Heer can create a film in which, to paraphrase Debord, 'the false is a moment of the true' — a story that can serve the dual purpose of entertaining and shaping perceptions, much like the ancient fables or parables. The violence that occurs in the film is filtered by the use of a series of paintings by Peter Coad, saving the

audience from the desensitisation of graphically violent images. The characters are never known to us by name, only by archetypal names — the Tracker, the Follower, the Fanatic, the Veteran and the Fugitive (and only in the closing credits of the film). This presents archetypes in much the same way as we see them used in morality tales such as Aesop's Fables.

The combination of these unusual techniques, including the use of songs, is an artifice that quickly becomes comfortable for the audience. While events of the type portrayed in the film did happen, by doing away with any kind of pseudo-documentary film-making style this film can function more as a moral tale or fable. With that notion established from the very beginning of the film, we are more willing to accept its deliberate elements of artifice.

The two films *The Tracker* and *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, released in the same year, are set in much the same period — *The Tracker* in 1922 and *Rabbit-Proof Fence* in 1931 — yet neither film references the popular music of the time. The songs and musical underscore[10] in *The Tracker* could be considered contemporary melancholy United States southern blues delivered by an identifiably Aboriginal voice. References in the lyrics to 'my people' support the point of view as being of the Tracker himself, although this is not consistently held throughout. The voice is that of an external observer commenting from an alternative time from the action — perhaps reflecting back on events that have occurred in the past. This uncertainty of timeframe is another, slightly unsettling, element of artifice in the film that serves to break down the 'fourth wall' of the narrative,[11] forcing us constantly to question and engage with the process.

The music was originally intended to be performed live along with the screening of the film as part of the 2002 Adelaide Arts Festival, therefore the instrumentation is deliberately economical — drums, keyboards, bass, electric guitar and slide resonator guitar — five players plus the voice of Archie Roach. While the music of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* plays a fairly traditional subservient role to the narrative (using a non-traditional combination of instruments and sounds), the songs of *The Tracker* play an important part in the telling of the narrative and are very much to the forefront — the songs are mostly performed without the diegetic sound.[12] Both films use voice in their music scores; however, in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* this usually forms part of the blended sonic texture of the score. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* uses didjeridu to 'announce' one character and operates as part of a textural soundscape, whereas *The Tracker* features no didjeridu at all.

Indigenous productions

I have selected two Indigenous productions that place their characters in urban settings. As highlighted above, it is only relatively recently that the first feature-length film directed by an Aboriginal person was produced. The claim for the first feature film directed by an Indigenous person is highly contentious (Donovan and Lorraine 2002:11; McNiven 2010; Syron and Kearney 2007:26; Langton 1993:54).

Jindalee Lady

In 1992, against many setbacks (including his own declining health), Brian Syron was able to complete *Jindalee Lady*, which is claimed to be the first feature-length film to be directed and musically scored by an Australian Indigenous person, with Syron as director and Bart Willoughby as writer of the musical score. The film was also celebrated in the 1992 Dreamspeakers International Film & Arts Festival in Edmonton, Canada, as the first feature internationally to be directed by a First Nations person (Syron and Kearney 2007:back cover). Despite this international recognition, the film never gained a commercial release. Before the film had secured distribution, it was the subject of a quite critical discussion in a book commissioned by the Australian Film Commission (now part of Screen Australia) and authored by Marcia Langton (1993). Syron believed that the release of this book destroyed any chance the film might have had to gain commercial release (Syron and Kearney 2007:571–8), a point further developed in a book by one of the film's Executive Directors, Thomas G Donovan, detailing a legal case that was brought against the Australian Film Commission as a result (Donovan and Lorraine 2002).

Brian Syron was an actor, playwright, director and political activist. He wanted the first feature film directed by an Australian Indigenous person to make a strong statement. Particularly, Syron wanted to portray his Aboriginal characters as strong, creative, positive and successful in an urban environment, in contrast to any previous representation of Aboriginal people in film.

The film states its purpose overtly, establishing a number of binary oppositions embedded in the characterisations, the images, the music and the dialogue. The oppositions at the core of the film are not just between 'Black' and 'White', but also between man and woman, urban and traditional. These struggles remain unresolved, or resolved inconclusively, and this is a weakness in the film. Marcia Langton (1993:52) wryly comments: '"Primitivism" is dressed up with New Age style as perfectly reasonable behaviour among black yuppies who really appreciate Aboriginal culture. Thancoupi ceramic pots look so right in Japanese-inspired interior design.'

In the musical score, these philosophical conflicts are reflected by the use of rock music against traditional music, and by the acousmatic[13] sound source against the diegetic. Both of the men in the life of the central character, Lauren — the 'White' philandering music-producer husband and the 'Black' traditional filmmaker lover — are involved in recording/filming a group of rock musicians who are not seen.

The primary style of the underscore music is rock (without vocals) and not definably Australian, but overlaid with traditional Aboriginal music elements — didjeridu, clap sticks and singing — sometimes in combination with electric or acoustic guitar. A couple of times in the film, the underscore music becomes part of the mise en scène,[14] the acousmatic blending into the diegetic, and this transformation can be a little confusing. At two points, when characters are drinking together in a bar,

the resident band behind them comprises two didjeridus and a guitar — an unusual grouping for a 'pub band' and not what we actually hear. The didjeridu is an almost constant presence in the score. Although we are presented with Aboriginal characters who function successfully in the domains of business and the arts, the musical underscore serves to reinforce the strong political messages of the film by reminding us of the characters' links to traditional culture.

The Third Note

Catriona Mackenzie is an Aboriginal director who studied at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS) in Sydney, and the New York Film School. Her short film *The Third Note* (2000) was a graduation project for her Master of Arts in Directing at AFTRS. Two neighbours are at war — both are alienated from society: one is a blind Aboriginal woman (played by Deborah Mailman) and the other is a Russian immigrant with poor English skills (played by Leonid Dobrinski). I was brought in to write the score for the film. At a spotting session with the director (identifying the type and placement of music in the film), Mackenzie indicated that she didn't want the characters to be identified in the music with culturally specific signifiers, saying 'They are just two people!' Mackenzie did specify particular instruments for the two characters (piano and cello) and played some music that set the type of mood she wanted. Although I could not identify the composer, I recognised the style as that of the middle eighteenth-century Mannheim School in Germany (precursors to Beethoven's style), famous for a number of innovative orchestra techniques, most particularly, the use of dynamic swell. I took this element as the one to draw from usefully in writing the score for this film, rather than the style and instrumentation of the late eighteenth century German music that she played to me. As the film was one of lonely melancholy, I saw that I could use dynamic swell as a musical 'sigh' to highlight the characters' emotional state.

As an extra challenge, I was replacing another composer. Music had already been written and a part had been taught to Mailman to play on piano in the film. I had to write music that looked like what the character was playing, but was different. Early in the film, we see her reading a melody presented in braille, and I chose to use that as the source for harmonic excursions in the rest of the score.

Both characters are lonely and isolated, and that is reflected in the music. The solo voices of the two instruments, piano and cello, are supported by a mesh of dense harmonies played by strings, with unresolved dissonances reflecting the characters' loneliness. As the characters interact and reach a limited level of communication, beginning to break down the barriers between them, the melodic lines of the two instruments intertwine.

The instrumentation of the musical score is entirely derived from the Western orchestra, and as such is aligned with United States film music theorist Caryl Flinn's notion of the utopian music of classic Hollywood. The style is perhaps best compared

with that of contemporary Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto, or early twentieth-century French composer Erik Satie, with leanings toward a European style of film score.

Both films, *Jindalee Lady* and *The Third Note*, present their stories in non-regional contemporary settings — *Jindalee Lady* in the inner-city area with a strong artistic community, and *The Third Note* seemingly in an outlying suburb. Isolation is a primary experience for both characters in *The Third Note*. We assume the characters are isolated by both their location and by their respective disabilities, whereas the characters in *Jindalee Lady* appear to be part of vibrant social and business networks. *The Third Note* features music strongly where the piano and cello are primary foci in the film, giving a 'voice' for each character. Although the two characters come from very different cultures, the music is deliberately intended to avoid culturally specific signifiers, serving a largely subconscious role in the support of the narrative. By comparison, the music in *Jindalee Lady* is much more self-conscious and assertive, using didjeridu, clap sticks and traditional-style singing to serve a culture-defining role in the telling of the narrative.

Conclusions

It is hard to draw definitive conclusions from such a small selection; however, this group of films, which includes productions by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous directors, demonstrates a range of responses to and a progression in the representation of Indigeneity in the music of Australian films. As we have seen, film directors have different goals and motivations when choosing narrative techniques appropriate to any one project and using music in the process of storytelling. Films made in the decades before the films in this selection generally portrayed Australian Indigenous people as a homogeneous or de-personalised group[15] and used the numbing effect of the Western orchestra as a 'comfort zone' from which to reinforce dominant ideologies. An analysis of contemporary film scores reveals a continuation of the practices of classical Hollywood films, opting for safe stereotypical scoring approaches (Flinn 1992:91):

> Although the classical approach to film music dominated a specific historical and institutional setting, and although that setting, though fully situated in the twentieth century, adhered to the aesthetic ideology of late nineteenth-century romanticism, it is by now apparent that romanticism's influence extends well beyond the golden era of Hollywood film scoring.

However, as we have seen, contemporary film directors, especially those operating independently of big film production studios, are free to choose less stereotypical approaches.

In the search for more efficient stereotypes to signify Aboriginality in film music, the didjeridu came to supplant the use of orchestra. Indeed, as there were few universal stereotypes in use for orchestral scoring to represent Aboriginality, the unique and easily identifiable sound of the didjeridu was much more effective than any attempt using the orchestra had been. In more recent films than those discussed in this study, and especially for films made by Indigenous directors, it appears there is a tendency away from the use of didjeridu as a cultural signifier. Perhaps this indicates a stereotype whose time has passed — this shall be the topic of a future article.

There has been a growing awareness and interest in Indigenous stories, whether told by Indigenous or non-Indigenous directors, evidenced by the success of recent films such as *Ten Canoes*, *Australia*, *Samson and Delilah*, *Stone Brothers* and *Bran Nue Dae*. Film funding bodies are becoming more amenable to funding Indigenous projects, directors are prepared to take greater risks, more Indigenous directors are gaining the skills and experience to tell their stories, and more opportunities are opening up to tell those stories on an international stage.

Music is, of course, only one aspect in a film of the representation of culture, and only part of the narrative process. However, the influence of the music in a film, as pointed out by Gorbman (1987:1), is subtle, hidden. By its nature, music can have a more potent effect in reinforcing a cultural sub-narrative than other elements of the film process. If it is said that 'a picture is worth a thousand words', the powerful ability of music to convey emotions and to establish characterisations, as well as to form identifications with the situations and characters, leads us to say 'music is worth a thousand pictures'.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Kassabian (2001:3) defines *affiliating identifications* as the engagement of the audience through the use of well-known songs 'depending on histories forged outside the film scene'. The alternative, for music composed especially for the film and therefore not carrying the same 'histories', Kassabian (2001:2) defines as *assimilating identifications*.

2. Pentatonic (five-note) scales use a limited set of notes, such as in certain types of 'folk song'. Compared to the more usual Western seven-note scale, the music is 'simpler'. Southern United States blues music often conforms to a pentatonic scale.

3. Chromatic music uses all 12 possible notes in the Western scale — all the black and white keys on a piano. The resulting music can sound unsettling, or 'foreign', although all traditional musics are built from limited note sets, as indeed is most Western music.

4. Covell (1967: 69) gives some deliciously awful renderings of Aboriginal song into European idioms.

5. In ancient Greek drama a group of performers would be on the stage but outside the story, passing comments on the action, in speech, song and in dance. A humorous contemporary rendering of the Greek Chorus can be seen in Woody Allen's film *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995).

6. This is intimated throughout Langton's extended essay of 1992, but stated more clearly in a quote of Mackinolty and Duffy, in Langton (1992: 19). Syron states the

point quite plainly at various points in his book, but particularly at p.577 (Syron & Kearney 2007).

7. McFarlane (2003: 60) quoting from Jennings (1999:2).

8. Also, see McFarlane (2003: 60) and Cordaiy (2002: 28).

9. Hybridisation is discussed at length by Taylor (2007:140) in his essay entitled 'Some versions of difference: Discourse of hybridity in transnational musics'.

10. In this instance, *underscore* is taken to mean the musical accompaniment to a scene used to enhance or set the underlying mood of the narrative, or to indicate hidden feelings or emotions for the characters portrayed.

11. The 'fourth wall', a term deriving from the theatre, refers to the experience of viewing a performance on a box set on a proscenium arch stage. The action on stage is framed by the three walls of the set, plus an imaginary wall, which is the front of the stage, through which the spectators view the performance. At times, the writer may use techniques that directly confront the notion of the passive spectator, such as Shakespeare's 'asides' to the audience. This is referred to as a breaking down of the fourth wall.

12. 'Diegetic sound is sound that the film leads us to believe the characters can (or could) hear' (Chion 2009:474); in other words, sounds generated (believably) by sources that we can see, or have seen. For example, if we have seen another character who talks while walking out of shot, and some time later we still hear that voice, we can believe that the characters on screen also hear that voice. If we hear a voice but don't know from where it comes, this could possibly be voiceover intended for the spectators, but perhaps not audible to the characters we see. Not knowing the source or direction causes potential confusion — this would then be referred to as a *non-diegetic* or *acousmatic* sound.

13. 'Acousmatic — (coined by Pierre Schaeffer, 1952) Pertaining to the auditory situation in which we hear sounds without seeing their cause or source…The effects of acousmatic perception vary widely, depending on whether or not we have previously seen the source of the sound. If the source has been seen, the acousmatic sound carries along with it a mental visual representation; when the source has not been seen, the sound strikes us more abstractly and in some cases can become an enigma. In most cases, however, in film and elsewhere, the cause of acousmatic sounds is precisely identified' (Chion 2009:465).

14. Mise en scène — the image or tableaux that is presented on screen.

15. For an example, refer to the analysis of *Bitter Springs* (1950) by Deb Verhoeven (2007).

Chapter 5

Neither dots nor bark: Positioning the urban artist

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Abstract: *This paper considers the positioning of the urban Indigenous artist through an examination of the selection of Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1990 under the rubric 'Not dots or bark' (O'Ferrall 1990). At that time the mainstream art world was still uncertain how it rated urban art by Indigenous artists. It was not even sure how to categorise Rover Thomas, as he came from a town in the remote East Kimberley and depicted a ceremonial landscape that included roads and bridges. Neither Thomas nor Nickolls fitted easily into the two generally accepted categories of Aboriginal art at that time: dot painters from Papunya or bark painters from Arnhem Land. These two categories in denial of their cross-cultural histories were regarded as the 'new primitive' and had the purchase on timeless authenticity. Aboriginal art was perceived as 'homogenous' and 'classical', but 'Venice challenges this notion' (Caruana and Isaacs 1990). Prior to the Venice Biennale, Aboriginal art suffered from what was then termed category panic: if new work was 'neither dots nor bark', how should it be categorised and was it authentically Aboriginal?*

Introduction

The 1990 Venice Biennale is a hinge point in a critical decade that begins in 1984. It can be reliably said that a year later, in 1985, Rover Thomas began painting in ground-up local ochres on board and canvas, almost a decade after his discovery in 1975 of the *Kuril Kuril*[1] ceremony in a series of dreams after Cyclone Tracy. His first subjects were taken from the boards used by the dancers performing the *Kuril Kuril* and, understandably, were influenced by the work of a senior Gija artist, Paddy Tjaminji,

who had been instructed by Rover Thomas as the dreamer of the *Kuril Kuril* to paint the dance boards.

In the Kimberley artists use the word 'boards' to denote paintings on any introduced surface, including canvas. Very soon Thomas's repertoire expanded and incorporated the multifarious aspects of the country he was familiar with; the stories of the mythological travels of ancestor figures from the Western Desert that he had grown up with and the ancestral stories of his adopted Gija country. Thomas also painted the modern history of that country, such as its roads, bridges and other man-made landmarks, and its Indigenous contact history of frontier encounters and massacres. While Thomas's work remained largely non-figurative, there was nothing in the past or the present it might not encompass — from telephone boxes to crossroads in Tokyo. Thomas's appetite for painting the world he encountered was voracious and did not privilege the old over the new. He was interested in delineating the marks on the country, whether they had been made by Dreaming figures or surveyors with bulldozers.

In 1984, the same year that Rover Thomas began painting at Warmun in the East Kimberley, the first significant exhibition of urban Aboriginal art was held in Sydney. *Koori Art '84* was held at Artspace and curated by sociologist and academic Vivien Johnson. Trevor Nickolls was one of the artists exhibited, as was Banduk Marika, a Yolŋu woman from Yirrkala in north-east Arnhem Land who was then living and working in Sydney and establishing herself as a fabric designer and printmaker. Three years later, Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Ko-operative was formed in Chippendale (close to Redfern in Sydney) and ANCAAA, the Association of Northern and Central Australian Aboriginal Artists, was also created. In 1988 Boomalli combined with ANCAAA to hold a joint exhibition under the banner *Artworks Produced and Managed by Aboriginal People*, which included the work of Rover Thomas. However, Boomalli did not exhibit Trevor Nicholls' work, perhaps because he was one of the first recognised urban artists and already well known.

Trevor Nickolls was the founding father of urban Aboriginal art and in his work you see many of the tropes associated with 'The Urban Aboriginal Artist': the kitsch reclamation of the diorama black dolly, the fierce bloody polemic, the use of overt symbols and puns, the brightly lit carnival colours, the wholesale raiding of the Western art cultural armoury, the issues associated with using traditional marks in *rarrk* and dots. Nickolls' poetry and punning constantly materialise language, a tendency that Richard Bell, Gordon Hookey and Gordon Bennett have made into an art form. His many alter egos prefigure Bennett's John Citizen. Without Nickolls how and where might Destiny Deacon, Robert Campbell Jr, Lin Onus, HJ Wedge, Ian Abdullah and Julie Dowling have begun? In 1985, just after *Koori Art '84*, Ulli Beier published a monograph, *Dream Time – Machine Time: The art of Trevor Nickolls*, which clearly signalled Nickolls' significance as an artist.

The child of an Aboriginal mother and a Scottish father, Nickolls grew up in the outer industrial suburbs of Adelaide under the shadow of Namatjira and he began

art school around the time of the beginnings of Papunya Tula. He was an unusually sensitive child and was directed to art early on. His first discovery was Picasso, the Picasso of *Guernica* (1937); the head turned sideways looking up at a foreboding sky terrified and pleading for release. That head has been a continuous recurrent presence in Nickolls' work; it is often serrated like a cut-out cardboard crown or a sawtooth factory roof.

In Nickolls' work self-portrait manifests in many forms and is frequently doubled; playing cards, Janus faces, Gemini figures and double head optical illusions; now you see me, now you don't, I am seen and I am hiding, or I am hidden; obscured and covered over by that other part of myself. Sometimes the doubling takes the form of inversion; the card figures that read upside down or the faces that divide along their own profile, in mourning for the lost twin, the other self. The split selves grow and proliferate into the split world, which is the dialectic of modernity: Dreamtime and machinetime, nature and nurture, spirit and commerce.

To understand the context in which Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls were selected to represent Australia in the 1990 Venice Biennale, I consider certain events such as the Saatchi & Saatchi advertising campaign for the Northern Territory Tourist Commission and the exhibition proposed by 'Ace' Bourke (which I will return to shortly) and the discourse surrounding them in the period leading up to 1990. They clearly indicate the level of category panic that was prevalent in Aboriginal art at the time. Since the early 1970s the term 'transitional' had gained some currency as an umbrella term used to describe Indigenous work that was seen as neither narrowly and strictly traditional nor unquestionably mainstream 'modern' art. It had first been applied to Papunya painting but had eventually withered away. By 1985 'transitional' persisted as a descriptor. Anthropologist Vincent Megaw (1985:51) invoked it in his criticism of the initial hang at the Australian National Gallery — 'at the time of its opening celebrations in 1982, no example of transitional or contemporary, non-traditional, non-tribal Aboriginal art was on view' — to make the point that acrylic art was not recognised in that institution. In the same publication, the term 'transitional' was applied by the maverick Papunya Tula art co-ordinator and supreme marketer Andrew Crocker to describe both Papunya and bark painting. Crocker (1985:45) argued that in these paintings, 'neither are the materials wholly traditional, nor the motives for the painting, nor the use to which the paintings are put', and he separates them from 'ceremonial painting'. For Crocker (1985:46) the 'transitional' are the 'commercial efforts' but he does acknowledge that 'there is probably an overlapping in both directions'. It is significant that Crocker embraces 'transitional' to describe Papunya art and in the same move locates it on the same level of *transition* as bark painting. Crocker continues to place the work at 'the other end of the scale', the work made by urban Aboriginals, calling it 'reconstituted art'. Crocker's final category is 'hybrid', which he applies to textile design, music and ceramics (Crocker 1985). 'Transitional' is a distinctly uncomfortable label: neither pure enough to be traditional, nor so

adulterated as to be merely tourist art, but on the way from somewhere to somewhere and somehow not there yet, not a proper category or style with a very slippery meaning attached. A circuit breaker was needed to free these shackled binaries. The instability of this discourse, which I have characterised as 'category panic', is prevalent and palpable before Venice.

The 1989 Northern Territory Tourist Commission advertising campaign by Saatchi & Saatchi, *There's Nowhere in the World Like Our Own Territory* (NT Tourism 1989), featured an abundance of Aboriginal art: photographs of rock art, reproductions of bark paintings and desert dot painting, and examples of work commissioned from Yolŋu artist Terry Yumbul and Murri artist Arone Raymond Meeks. Yumbul made ochre paintings on paper in bark-painting style and animations. Many of them depicted non-traditional subjects, including a version of the Northern Territory Tourist Commission's logo, a brolga hovering over a sunset. Another had discrete images in separate panels divided by decorative *rarrk*: a tube of sunscreen, a bush hat, an aeroplane, a tour bus and, most bizarrely of all, a building designated 'bank'. The animation showed a plane flying by and an Aboriginal family driving along in a Toyota. Meeks' black and white prints in woodblock or lino cut style are the basis for a series of elegant posters: of birds, wildflowers, barramundi and a starry sky. In this one campaign, contemporary Aboriginal art is registered and modulated as if in four degrees: *Old Traditional* (rock painting), *New Traditional/Transitional* (barks and dots), *Contemporary Traditional* (Yumbul) and *Contemporary Modern* (Meeks). You might wonder where the *Reconstituted,* the *Hybrid* or the *Urban* is in all that.

If the Northern Territory tourism campaign represents the mainstream and the macro level, then the exhibitions proposed by Anthony 'Ace' Bourke at Hogarth Galleries speak for the inner circle and the micro level of the articulation of the discourse. Bourke was concerned that the 1990 Sydney Biennale had not included any Aboriginal art and he proposed two exhibitions at Hogarth Galleries during the period of the Biennale: *Urban Aboriginal Art 1990* and *Innovations in Aboriginal Art 1990.* Writing in 1989 to Joel Smoker, the co-ordinator at Waringarri Aboriginal Arts in Kununurra, Bourke said, 'There is a degree of confusion in the public's mind about "urban", "traditional" and "innovative" Aboriginal art and for example, which category Jimmy Pike falls into' (Bourke 1989). Bourke proposed that Rover Thomas and Jack Britten from Waringarri Aboriginal Arts should be included in the *Innovations* exhibition, alongside Jimmy Pike, Jack Wunuwun and Banduk Marika. The work by Jimmy Pike confounded this classification. Although a traditional Walmajarri man who grew up in the Great Sandy Desert, Pike had begun making art while serving time in Fremantle gaol under the tutelage and support of two non-Indigenous art teachers, Stephen Culley and David Wroth. After release from prison Jimmy Pike returned to country to paint, and formed a partnership with his former teachers to license his artwork under the name Desert Designs. 'Ace' Bourke did not indicate who he considered urban, but he was well versed in the urban, having previously held solo

exhibitions of Trevor Nickolls and Sally Morgan. Bourke argued that Rover Thomas and Jack Britten 'are central to the thesis of the exhibition. How "traditional" and how "innovative" are their paintings?' (Bourke 1989). Although the exhibition never eventuated, again there was an attempt to wrangle the works into the correct category, while still maintaining the demarcation around the 'urban'.

The tortuous gradations of these terms to describe Aboriginal art and the category panic prompted exaggerated responses, which I call 'category policing' by the art world, and the nervous dividing and re-dividing is reminiscent of the racialist discourse that categorised the Aboriginal person as 'full blood', 'half-caste', 'quadroon' and 'octoroon' on the basis of perceived quantities of Aboriginal blood. By analogy, in Aboriginal art at this time, it was as if blood was the indicator of perceived authenticity, and if you go so far as to substitute the Chief Protector for the Aboriginal Art Theorist, then the categories move from the traditional (standing for the 'full blood') to the transitional (standing for the 'half-caste') and the reconstituted (presumably standing for the 'octoroon'!).

In 1990 the pairing of Trevor Nickolls and Rover Thomas was a curatorial coup and a highly conscious strategy on the part of curator Michael O'Ferrall of the Art Gallery of Western Australia to blow apart these constricting definitions of Aboriginal art at the time. O'Ferrall, the prime mover behind the Venice Biennale coup, was one of the most experienced people in the burgeoning field of Aboriginal art curating. O'Ferrall was the first art co-ordinator at Yirrkala and was part of a loose coalition of curators and art advisors, including Vivien Johnson, Djon Mundine (then at Ramingining) and Wally Caruana at the National Gallery of Australia, who were determined to position Aboriginal art as contemporary art. They utilised forums, reviews, publications and exhibitions to make their point and ensured that Aboriginal art was presented in an unsegregated and non-compartmentalised way alongside other Australian contemporary art. George Milpurrurru, the traditional bark painter, had been selected for both the 1979 and 1986 Sydney Biennales. Milpurrurru's inclusion was brokered by Djon Mundine, a visionary art co-ordinator in the remote community of Ramingining in Arnhem Land. Mundine's initiatives addressed category panic in a constructive, critical and interventionist manner and demonstrated how permeable the borders were. Mundine saw to it that traditional art, whether it was bark painting in the case of Milpurrurru or weaving in the case of Robyn Djunginy's innovative and unprecedented woven bottles, which could be read as sculptural objects, was repositioned and placed in the extreme white cube modernist glare of the Biennale. As co-ordinator of the art centre at Ramingining, Mundine had a strategy that brought together urban and local artists to meet on country, which led to collaborations and cross-fertilisations of art and the founding of a bush art academy at Garmedi, an outstation near Ramingining presided over by Elder and artist Jack Wunuwun.

O'Ferrall had already done a dry run for the Biennale by curating *On the Edge* (O'Ferrall 1989) for the Art Gallery of Western Australia in the previous year, where

he included Trevor Nickolls alongside Bede Tungtalum (a Tiwi artist best known for founding Tiwi Designs and for his work as a printmaker), two bark painters, Mandjuwi from Elcho Island and George Milpurrurru from Ramingining, and Western Australia's own emerging artist Rover Thomas. The exhibition's subtitle was *Five Contemporary Aboriginal Artists* and O'Ferrall stressed that 'their art presents some of the key characteristics within the present day plurality of Aboriginal art practice' and that it revealed 'a sense of landscape identified as both personal, historical and social space' (O'Ferrall 1989). O'Ferrall knew his judgment was being backed because both Thomas and Nickolls were featured later in 1989 in exhibitions at the newly opened Deutscher Gertrude Street Gallery in Melbourne. Trevor Nickolls had a solo show and Rover Thomas was prominent in an exhibition from Waringarri Art Centre, *Turkey Creek Dreaming*. In the same year as the Venice Biennale, Thomas and Nickolls were both included in the Queensland Art Gallery *Balance 1990* exhibition.

The Venice Biennale was the distillation of O'Ferrall's ideas for *On the Edge*. By pairing Port Adelaide–born and art-school-trained artist Trevor Nickolls with the charismatic Kimberley stockman Rover Thomas, O'Ferrall uncoupled the debilitating dichotomies of traditional/transitional and timeless/contemporary, and replaced them for a brief blazing moment with a notion of regional, individual artists apparently not dependent on tribal or group affiliations. In the space O'Ferrall cleared, categories were destabilised. Australian critics floundered as they tried to compare and contrast these new types of Aboriginal artists. European critics were utterly dazed and confused.

To examine the language in which Nickolls and Thomas were cast and received, the front cover of the special issue of *Artforce* published by the Australia Council describes them as 'contemporary Aboriginal artists' and notes that people who are familiar with 'traditional' Aboriginal art will find they represent a different and challenging direction and 'the start of a new understanding about contemporary Aboriginal art' (*Artforce* 1990). Inside the publication, O'Ferrall is discovered to be the source of the quote. He elaborates, 'Both artists' work was chosen because it is dramatically different to the more recognised traditions of Aboriginal art — the traditional style is viewed more as a regional product than as an intensely personal expression' (*Artforce* 1990:8). The link between Thomas and Nickolls was that they were individual artists as opposed to representatives of their tribes or communities. The emphasis on them as individuals may have been a strategy on O'Ferrall's part to avoid using the tainted and loaded term 'transitional'.

The term 'transitional' had hovered around Rover Thomas, never quite settling yet not going away until Venice. There had been disquiet in some quarters about exactly what Rover Thomas's work was; some kind of new funeral ceremony; art arising from a dream about a motor car and an aeroplane focused on a recent event, Cyclone Tracy. Warmun or Turkey Creek is just off the main road between Kununurra and Halls Creek. It is remote but arguably not isolated, which is glossed in this context as isolated from modern Western influences that threaten the authentic purity of

Indigenous expression. Moreover, it was known that Rover Thomas was painting country not his own but Gija land while dwelling in Kununurra on Mirriwung country; his situation was complex and problematic but not that unusual for an Aboriginal person in the Kimberley, where displacement, dislocation and dispossession is the norm and the direct consequence of the entrenched encroachment of pastoralism and the relentless pursuit of mineral wealth. Vivien Johnson, writing about Narelle Jubelin's exhibition *Trade Delivers People*, shown in Aperto at the 1990 Venice Biennale, says of Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls, 'Aboriginal artists have in recent times laid to rest the fallacy of "primitivism" by invading the spaces of High Art with powerful contemporary art, whose conceptual sophistication and aesthetic impact rival instead of reinforce their non Aboriginal contemporaries' (Johnson 1990a:unpaginated).

Wally Caruana and Jennifer Isaacs edited a special supplement of *Art Monthly Australia* in 1990, *The Land, The City: The emergence of urban Aboriginal art*, which focused on the 'art of urban and rural Aboriginal artists from non-classical traditions and addressed notions of personal artistic classification, cultural perspective and even the very language used to describe these artists and their work' (Caruana and Isaacs 1990:3). Meanwhile, in Venice, European critics were nonplussed. London-based art historian Margaret Garlake said that 'to an outsider, both artists' work is an uneasy hybrid for which a more appropriate name than Aboriginal art would be "new Australian painting"' (Whisson et al. 1990:6). Garlake continued, in the article, to praise a Papunya exhibition held in Venice by Melbourne gallerist Gabrielle Pizzi at the same time as the Biennale, saying, 'it may not have been any more closely related than the official exhibition [Thomas and Nickolls] but it showed a new aspect of Aboriginal painting which appeared to have achieved a more creative synthesis with western abstract art' (Whisson et al. 1990:6). These comments suggest that 'dot' painting was only accepted into the international mainstream by ignoring its primary reference to country, place and affinity. Subsuming Western Desert art into abstract expressionism persisted. And this is 20 years after its first appearance at Papunya.

The Venice Biennale was daring and risky, there was a lot riding on it and it happened at a time of turmoil at the Art Gallery of Western Australia. The Director, Betty Churcher, and the Chairman of the Board, Robert Holmes à Court, the brilliant mercurial entrepreneur, had fallen out badly and Holmes à Court would not be retained as Chairman of the Board and Churcher would leave Western Australia to take up the appointment as Director of the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. However, Holmes à Court and Churcher had created a synergy that fuelled the vision and the generous resources that were needed to ensure it succeeded. It did work, it made a splash and there were no disasters. In speaking with Michael O'Ferrall (the curator), Seva Frangos (the exhibition manager) and Annie English (then an honours student doing an internship at the Art Gallery of Western Australia), it becomes clear that it was seen as a high risk, high gain enterprise undertaken at a tumultuous time (English 2010; Frangos 2010; O'Ferrall 2010).

The exhibition *Tagari Lia: Contemporary Aboriginal Art 1990 — From Australia*, shown in the United Kingdom in Glasgow, Swansea and Manchester, opened in 1990 just after Venice. It was a catholic and comprehensive mix of the best contemporary artists — all 32 of them — and included plenty of dot and bark painters alongside Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls and a roll call of urban artists: Lin Onus, Gordon Bennett, Fiona Foley, Karen Casey, Arone Raymond Meeks, Sally Morgan, Judy Watson, Michael Riley, Pooarar, Bronwyn Bancroft and Robert Campbell Jr. The exhibition's message was to build on Venice. In the catalogue foreword Lin Onus argued that 'while barks and dots are central to Aboriginal art…in practice, Aboriginal artists live all over Australia' (Onus and Smith 1990:1). Terry Smith's extensive catalogue essay, 'Aboriginal art now: Writing its variety and vitality', is notable for locating Rover Thomas and Jimmy Pike with Trevor Nickolls in the same section, entitled 'Koori culture meets post-modernism' (Onus and Smith 1990:11). Smith concludes that the achievement of these artists is 'to burst open the category "Aboriginal art"' and that '"Aboriginality" has entered the art discourse…whatever the diversity of their backgrounds, and expressed in their art, despite its variety of form and content' (Onus and Smith 1990:13). Smith's comments are somewhat sweeping. Is he suggesting that Nickolls, Pike and Thomas are all Kooris? Is Smith suggesting that if Aboriginal art is to enter the discourse then it must do so under the rubric of postmodernism and be leeched of its Aboriginality? This move is as undesirable as stretching the particular regional term 'Koori', denoting people from south-eastern Australia, to become an umbrella term to cover Trevor Nickolls, who is Koori, as well as Jimmy Pike, a Walmajarri man from the north-west Kimberley, and Rover Thomas, a Kukatja-Wangkajunka from the East Kimberley. At this moment in the discourse it is as if 'Koori' stood for any Aboriginal person who was not perceived as 'traditional' and almost stood for a person who was 'transitional' themselves.

Venice made Rover Thomas famous and Trevor Nickolls contributed to Thomas's fame by his marvellous depictions of him. Thomas is most memorable in Nickolls' work *Roving in Thomas Town* (1994), in which Rover is sporting a green satin red-fringed rodeo shirt, proper tall-crowned Kimberley cowboy hat and the snakeskin boots Nickolls had bought for him. Nickolls continued to depict Rover Thomas as a celebrity cowboy in *The Adventures of Wanda Wandjina* (2001), which included a Wandjina family dominated by Wanda Wandjina, all bug eyed, her afro hair, a halo, gorgeous in her little miniskirt and carrying her dillybag like an attentive dolly bird. Thomas became the star of the show in an elaborate play in which Nickolls was the dramaturge. Trevor the man is there, too, cool in his shades, driving the old green FJ Holden, keeping the show on the road, or one of his alter egos, the serrated-head man or the blue man with the striped singlet, is there larger than life.

Three weeks in Venice and time in Rome exposed Nickolls to art with a capital A and he soaked it all up, seeing the works of Van Gogh, Picasso and Giotto in the flesh. It was a feast, a garden of earthly delights. Just look at how Trevor Nickolls depicts

himself in his painting *Roving in Thomas Town*: lounging in the big chair in Peggy Guggenheim's garden, he might be overwhelmed but he is certainly in his element, right in the thick of it. Venice was indeed a marvellous moment in the history of the reception of Aboriginal art. After Venice the 'urban' was established and its position unassailable, the 'innovative' was assumed, the 'transitional' and 'reconstituted' dispensed with; Aboriginal art was recognised as the contemporary art it was.

In her 1990 article 'Into the urbane: Urban Aboriginal art in the Australian art context', Vivien Johnson reflected, 'who dreamed then (in 1984) that by 1990 Trevor Nickolls and Rover Thomas would be representing Australia in the 1990 Venice Biennale?' (Johnson 1990b:23). The 1990 Venice Biennale was an important watershed on a grand canal and after it Aboriginal art had been positioned and recognised as unquestionably contemporary art, at least among Australians.

CODA La Lutta continua…

It would take longer, much longer, for the Europeans to catch up, due to the entrenched ethnographic model that disallowed Aboriginal art to be alive, contemporary and innovative. This investment in the primitive was difficult for Europeans to give up. We should not forget that in 1994, at the end of this decisive decade, Gabrielle Pizzi had to argue for Aboriginal art as living contemporary art in Cologne. To the Cologne curators it was either primitive art (if the artists were dead it should be in an anthropology collection) or, if it was being produced now, it was folk art and belonged in an ethnology institute. Pizzi persisted only to be told in 1998 that she 'could only exhibit work by urban Aboriginal artist HJ Wedge and not the acclaimed bark artist John Mawurndjul' (Smee 2002). Smee diagnoses the problem as 'category confusions'. This time around the category is 'contemporary' as opposed to 'traditional', with Wedge categorised as a contemporary Australian artist and Mawurndjul relegated to the category of traditional Aboriginal folk artist. Almost a decade later in 2005, a major retrospective of Mawurndjul's work, <<rarrk>> *John Mawurndjul: Journey through Time in Northern Australia*, opened in Switzerland at Basel's Museum Tinguely, where the category 'traditional Aboriginal folk artist' was finally put to rest. Mawurndjul was feted internationally as a contemporary Aboriginal artist and integrated into the discourse of art (Volkenandt and Kaufmann 2009).

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Note

1. *Kuril Kuril* – the orthography used in 1990: subsequently other spellings were *Kril Kril*, *Krill Krill*, *Gril Gril*, *Grill Grill* and *Goorrir Goorrir*; today, following linguist Frances Kofod, *Gurirr Gurirr* is the preferred spelling.

Chapter 6

Brisbane's Annual Sports and Cultural Festival: Connecting with community and culture through festivals

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Abstract: *In Australia traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage continues to thrive, not only through art, storytelling, dance and community gatherings (van Den Berg et al. 2005) but also through events. Sporting events, for instance, provide Indigenous Australians with a means to reclaim heritage, increase economic independence and preserve Indigenous culture (van Den Berg et al. 2005). The ability of events to positively contribute to Indigenous peoples can be seen in the case of Brisbane's Annual Sports and Cultural Festival. Since its inception, the festival has grown from a small, local community 'get together' to become a relatively successful sports and cultural festival. Funding was provided by AIATSIS and the event organiser, First Contact Inc., to undertake a socio-economic evaluation of the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival. The research revealed that the festival plays a central socio-cultural role in the Brisbane region and provides opportunity for celebration, cultural rejuvenation, entrepreneurship, tourist activity and economic gains for the region. Attendance at the festival has increased economic and social capital by providing participants with specific opportunities for accessing and developing community resources, improving social cohesiveness and providing a focus for celebration.*

Introduction

Events play a central economic and socio-cultural role in different societies and cultures (Alomes 1985) and can generate both economic and social capital for host communities. For instance, among other things, events can facilitate the preservation of culture and traditions, facilitate increased economic receipts and employment, attract visitors to a host region and provide the host region with the opportunity to enhance its image (Pennington-Gray and Holdnak 2002). Not surprisingly, then, the event industry has become a significant socio-cultural and economic phenomenon, increasingly demonstrating a capacity to generate positive outcomes for host communities and host regions (Van de Wagen 2005). Such contributions to the economic and social wellbeing of a region are adding to the growing importance being afforded to events globally and in Australia in particular (Jago and Shaw 1998).

Australia, as home to one of the world's oldest living cultures, is well placed to benefit from a growing interest in Indigenous events. According to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC 2001:12), 'there is potential for more Indigenous products to be incorporated into a broader range of Australian experiences', such as the development and production of Indigenous events. Increasingly, then, the role of Indigenous events is becoming more significant as they become an integral part of Australia's event industry. In fact, each year a multitude of Indigenous events are staged across Australia and include exhibitions, sport events, artistic events, educational conferences, commemorative ceremonies and cultural festivals. Some events, such as the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival in Brisbane, arguably facilitate the development of social capital while representing a vibrant and vital part of Australian society. The significant role Indigenous events can play as facilitators of not only positive socio-cultural benefits but also economic benefits should not be underestimated. Indeed, the value and importance of Indigenous events was noted by the Northern Territory Tourist Commission (2004:10) in its Indigenous Tourism Strategy:

> festivals offer Indigenous communities an opportunity to share and showcase their culture in a managed manner for a limited period. This can result in communities experiencing some of the benefits of tourism without significant social impacts… Indigenous festivals are also very important in increasing mutual understanding between [the] host community and other Territory residents.

Festivals and events are increasingly being used as instruments to sustain local economies (Chang 2006). Specifically, sporting and cultural festivals are providing communities with the opportunity to experience not only leisure episodes but also positive socio-cultural and economic benefits. Accordingly, more Indigenous communities are looking towards sporting and cultural festivals as vehicles to facilitate

a more positive future through the development of, for example, capacity building, self-determination and reconciliation (Downey 1993).

The hosting of a sporting and/or cultural festival is often justified by the host region in terms of long-term economic consequences directly or indirectly resulting from the staging of the festival (Mules and Faulkner 1996). Yet the success of a festival, such as the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival in Brisbane, cannot and, indeed, should not be judged simply on profit and loss (Gratton et al. 2000). Although the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival generates economic benefits for the host community (i.e. First Contact Inc.), it also provides a forum for cohesion and celebration in the larger Indigenous community, while concomitantly strengthening and enhancing cultural knowledge and development. Thus, the purpose of this study was to identify and analyse both the socio-cultural *and* economic impacts generated by the festival in order to determine the extent to which the festival facilitates Indigenous community development.

The term 'community' is an ambiguous and contested concept. In this instance it refers to a network of people (Hunt and Smith 2005; Kilpatrick and Vanclay 2005) and takes the form of a geographically dispersed group that has a common history and shared identity, including language groups. The community is 'linked together by a web of personal relationships, cultural and political connections and identities, networks of support, traditions and institutions, shared socioeconomic conditions or common understandings and interest' (Hunt and Smith 2005:6). Thus, for the purpose of this paper, 'Indigenous community' refers to groups of people 'with commonalities based in historical and cultural practices' (Finlayson 1991:183), who are also bound by a common interest or a common self-identifying feature such as ethnic origin and who may well be geographically dispersed.

Brisbane's Annual Sports and Cultural Festival

First Contact Inc. is a not-for-profit Indigenous service that was established in 1992. It is an incorporated association that provides a number of different services to the Brisbane Indigenous community, such as:

- providing 24-hour resource and referral, training and development facilities
- giving support and guidance to organisations and projects within south-east Queensland
- monitoring, developing and reviewing proposals and recommendations to government and other bodies or authorities
- implementing strategies to break the social cycles in the youth sector by addressing needs through individual and group development strategies
- conducting night patrols to monitor youth on the streets in designated hotspots
- conducting and co-ordinating preventative, proactive projects, innovative activities and events (First Contact Inc. 2008).

One event for which the organisation is responsible is the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival, an Indigenous event that has been held annually in Brisbane since 1992. The festival, which was created, developed and staged by First Contact Inc., aims to bring together Indigenous and non-Indigenous Rugby League touch football teams from Brisbane, regional Queensland, interstate and overseas. Additionally, a range of Indigenous musicians and cultural entertainers perform on the 'community stage' throughout the three-day event and various stalls have food and arts and crafts for sale. As outlined by First Contact Inc. (2007) in the festival program:

> it is a gathering of our people and a time when you have true community spirit; it is a time to showcase our sporting abilities; it is a time when people are considered as one, irrelevant of race, age or ability; it is a time to share different culture and interests; it is a time to catch up with old friends and a time to make new; it is a time when people have hopes for their future and thoughts from the past; it is a time to be proud of who we are; it is a time when we welcome visitors to Brisbane; and, it is a time when we can showcase our local Indigenous artists and sports people.

The festival seeks to achieve outcomes for the Indigenous community, the wider community in general and for numerous funding organisations.

The primary focus of the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival is a Rugby League touch football tournament with teams competing in three divisions: Men's

Figure 1: Touch football playing fields at the 14th Annual Sports and Cultural Festival, Brisbane, 24 November 2007. Photograph Michelle Whitford

Open, Mixed Open and Mixed Divisions. With the exception of the school divisions, all teams compete for prize money, which is generated through the nomination fee charged to play in the competition. Showcase matches at the festival include the 'Battle of the States Cup Challenge' between Queensland and New South Wales and the 'Challenge of the Nations', with international teams competing from New Zealand and Papua New Guinea. The festival has grown from a small, local community 'get together' to become an international sports and cultural festival with growing numbers of participants and visitors. Such growth has been facilitated by media support from local radio and newspapers and sponsorship from Commonwealth and Queensland state government departments, as well as the Brisbane City Council.

AIATSIS, with the support of First Contact Inc., funded researchers from The University of Queensland's School of Tourism to undertake an economic evaluation of the 14th Annual Sports and Cultural Festival held on the last weekend in November 2007. This paper provides an overview of the major findings that emerged from the study in regard to the socio-economic contribution of the festival.

Research methods

To examine the extent to which the festival facilitates Indigenous community development through the generation of positive socio-cultural and economic impacts, a triangulated research strategy was employed to evaluate in detail the 14th Annual Sports and Cultural Festival. The research was underpinned by the ethics of Indigenous knowledge research (Sheehan and Walker 2001) and designed to ensure the reliability, validity and replicability of the study. The research adopted a post-positivist approach by utilising both qualitative and quantitative methods to achieve a more accurate indication of what is happening in reality (Phillips and Burbules 2000). The research design employed three tools: (1) a desk-based review of both domestic and international Indigenous festivals to identify potential socio-cultural and economic impacts. This review informed the refinement and development of the questionnaires and in-depth interviews. (2) A quantitative survey questionnaire that included 29 questions to elicit demographic data, economic and expenditure patterns, and socio-cultural aspects of the festival. Random sampling was employed over the three days of the festival, with attendees approached by the research team within the parameters of the event venue and invited to participate. A final sample of 481 festival participants was achieved. Results from the questionnaire were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) Version 15 for Windows, Microsoft Excel 2007 and the Encore Festival and Event Evaluation Kit developed by the Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre. (3) Qualitative in-depth interviews with 18 key stakeholders (i.e. representatives from local and interstate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander associations, and local and state government departments) associated with

the festival. Interviews were undertaken either via telephone or face to face and focused on the social and economic importance and contributions of the festival and motivations for funding/supporting the festival. All interviews were recorded with each participant's permission, transcribed verbatim and the data analysed using Neuman's (1997) principles of manifest and latent content analysis.

Research results

Festival attendee questionnaire

The festival attendee questionnaire showed that around 58% of respondents were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage, and there was a relatively even distribution between genders. Most of the festival attendees were aged between 18–24 (29%) and 25–34 (22%), and respondents generally attended the festival with family or friends (88%). Approximately 34% of these attended with their immediate family. Just over half of the respondents were from the Brisbane region (54%), followed by interstate visitors (25%), mainly from New South Wales, Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory, and intrastate Queensland visitors (20%).

Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their expenditure in Brisbane for the duration of the three-day festival to assist in determining the economic impact of the festival on the region. They were asked to detail in their responses both their own and their travel party's expenditure for a series of expenditure item categories, including accommodation; meals, food and drink; other entertainment; transport; personal services; and any other expenditure. These items were aggregated to calculate the total per respondent expenditure. Respondents were also asked to provide the number of people in their travel party who they were reporting on behalf of in order to determine per person expenditure at the reporting stage. This was based on a weighting system constructed within the Encore Festival and Event Evaluation Kit, which uses nights, origin and travel party size to determine estimates.

Based on festival attendance estimates of 10 000 visitors over the three days of the festival, it is estimated that the festival contributed some $656 000 of new expenditure to the Brisbane tourism region. Around 71% of this visitor expenditure was spent by interstate visitors. In addition, it is estimated that local attendees spent approximately $103 110 while attending the festival, although this cannot be counted as new expenditure to the region as the funds were already in Brisbane.

A series of questions in the questionnaire explored respondents' motivations for attending the festival, including their reasons for attending, whether they had attended the festival previously, and what other activities they had undertaken and/or planned to undertake while in Brisbane for the festival, with multiple responses permitted. The majority of those surveyed were spectators (59%) or competitors, teams, coaches and managers (35%). Around 51% of the respondents indicated that they attended

the event in order to 'support family or friends that were competing or performing at the event', while others cited 'perform, participate or compete' (34%) in the event, to 'socialise with friends or family' (21%), for 'fun and excitement', to 'support community organisation or event' (12.5%) and for 'enjoyment or relaxation' (12%). A large proportion of respondents (35%) indicated that they had never attended the festival previously, while around 26% were long-term visitors who had attended the event more than five times.

The respondents who were from outside the Brisbane region were also asked to provide information as to what other activities they undertook during their visit for the festival. Around 167 respondents (67% of total visitor respondents) who were visitors to Brisbane indicated that they had undertaken other activities aside from attending the festival during their stay in Brisbane. The majority indicated that they had visited friends or relatives (43%). Other cited activities included enjoying food and wine (30%), experiencing nature and the outdoors (11%), experiencing art and culture (10%), shopping (9%), clubbing, nightlife, partying, drinking or attending Schoolies (8%) and going to the movies (7%).

The respondents were asked if they felt the festival was important for the Brisbane region. Around 90% of the respondents believed that it was important for the region, 35% because it brought people together. Around 14% of the respondents thought that it was important because it attracted tourists and visitors to the region. Other reasons cited included that the festival helps to build new relationships (12%) and is a revenue generator for the region (10%). Further, 94% of the respondents considered the festival to be important for both the Indigenous community and individuals because the event brought people together and facilitated the gathering of communities (38%). A further 17% thought that the event gets people involved in the community and 14% thought the event showcased Indigenous sporting talent.

The festival was also considered valuable in sustaining Indigenous culture, traditions and values by around 87% of respondents. Of the responses received, 25% indicated that the festival provided the opportunity to bring different cultures and tribes together to display and showcase culture. A further 18% felt the festival's cultural performances contributed towards sustaining Indigenous culture, traditions and values. When the respondents were asked if they felt the festival helped to unite the community, the majority (82%) indicated that it did. The respondents were also asked if they felt the festival helped to strengthen social networks and relationships. Almost 92% of respondents felt that the festival helped to strengthen social networks and relationships because it provided the opportunity to meet new people and/or catch up with friends. Other reasons that were frequently cited included spending time with family/friends (12%) and having the opportunity to network (10%).

Nearly 92% of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the event and this was evident in the 86% of respondents who intended to attend the festival again in the future and the 91% who stated they would recommend the festival to family and

friends. A number of respondents (24%) felt that one of the strengths of the festival was that it brought people together. A separate set of comments (9%) mentioned that it brought cultures/tribes/nationalities together. Watching the touch games (9%) and playing the touch games (9%) were also popular, as were the atmosphere (7%) and the competition (7%).

Festival stakeholder interviews

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 18 festival stakeholders and aimed to identify the socio-cultural and economic impacts of the festival and discuss the key critical factors of the festival that can generate sustainable community development. Respondents overwhelmingly supported the notion that the festival helps to build local community resources and that it contributes towards the development of social capital. Most respondents discussed the importance of showcasing Indigenous culture and cited the festival as a good opportunity to do so. As such, the importance of Indigenous dance troupes, artists and singers was seen by all respondents as a vital component for enhancing the cultural focus of the festival. Indeed, the vast majority of respondents claimed that the festival made them feel more proud of their culture and heritage.

Respondents were also asked to discuss how festivals contribute towards pre-serving cultural heritage. Respondents cited cultural performances and bringing together groups of people as contributors. Respondents also considered the festival to be an important vehicle for strengthening family, friends and community, and most respondents discussed the family focus of the festival as important and appropriate. The opportunity for celebration at the festival was discussed with respondents and all agreed that the festival does promote celebration. Respondents cited a variety of things that are celebrated at the festival, including a sense of community, competition, camaraderie, culture and diversity.

In addition to the detailed economic data collected through the attendee survey, interview respondents were asked a series of questions regarding the economic impacts of the festival. First, respondents were asked (1) whether the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival focused on making money and whether profit was the main motivation behind hosting the event and (2) if the festival should provide opportunities for the community to make money. The vast majority of respondents did not consider money and the generation of profit to be a focus of the festival. Respondents noted, 'I think it focuses on bringing as many people from Australia with an Indigenous background into playing touch football and being involved with a cultural festival. I don't think it's about making money' and 'If it was a key motivation…I do not think the event would have continued over the last sixteen years, so yeah definitely not'. However, it was felt that the festival should provide entrepreneurial opportunities for the community. As some respondents noted, 'The festival is also one of largest community events before Christmas so we find that a lot of the community groups

and sporting clubs and small businesses are doing their fund raising or trying to generate funds for Christmas with some of the families' and 'The only capacity it should be making money in is for Indigenous owned and run small business…to keep and contribute to the Indigenous community and economy…to keep money within Indigenous owned businesses'. However, other respondents did not believe the festival should have an economic focus: 'No, don't think so if they are going to keep tailoring it along the lines of an Indigenous cultural festival' and 'No, don't think they should be making money off it — it's because it's about bringing people together'.

Finally, in terms of economic impacts, respondents were asked what they considered to be more important — the financial aspects of the festival or the social and cultural aspects. Only one respondent considered them to be of equal importance, with the remainder stating that the social and cultural elements were more important: 'Because the whole weekend is just a celebration of Indigenous people coming together' and 'The ramifications for the community are much greater than making a buck'.

Discussion: the celebration of sustainable community development

The staging of a festival can impact on the social life and structure of a community by either enhancing or detracting from the social environment of the region (Hall 1992; Soutar and McLeod 1993; Fredline and Faulkner 2000). The Annual Sports and Cultural Festival is a three-day community celebration and according to one respondent, 'The whole weekend [was] just a celebration of Indigenous people coming together' who were provided the opportunity to experience something different and broader than day-to-day living (South Australian Tourism Commission 1997). At the 14th Annual Sports and Cultural Festival some participants claimed that they particularly enjoyed 'the camaraderie among black fellas. You know getting together, being part of the mob, enjoying each other's company, talking about how things are going and how people are going in the community.' The study showed that the festival generated numerous positive socio-cultural impacts, with respondents identifying the development of social capital and cultural preservation as festival outcomes.

Importantly, though, common negative impacts often identified at festivals — such as disruption to resident lifestyles, traffic congestion, vandalism, overcrowding and crime (Dwyer et al. 2000) — were not identified at the 14th Annual Sports and Cultural Festival. However, it should be noted that local residents were not purposefully sampled and so impacts on the surrounding neighbourhood were not specifically sought. Other negative aspects, such as loss of authenticity and commoditisation (Ryan and Huyton 2000), were also not identified from this initial research. This can be attributed to the fact that the festival's objectives centre on the celebration of sport and culture, rather than simply showcasing it and, importantly, the management and leadership of the festival remain the responsibility and control of First Contact Inc.

and the Indigenous community of Brisbane. However, future research should explore these aspects in more detail.

Increasingly, festivals are deemed to facilitate the development of social capital and the results revealed that the majority of respondents believed that 'the strength of the festival [was] in building social capital across a number of Indigenous community groups'. Certainly, social cohesiveness was a theme that emerged in the research. For instance, each year thousands of people attend the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival for an array of reasons, including participation in cultural demonstrations, competitive sporting activities, and/or to socialise with family and friends. Indeed, all the interview respondents agreed that the festival focused on strengthening family, friends and community. According to one interview respondent, the festival developed a 'sense of togetherness with the community [where] lots of Indigenous people come together to celebrate Indigenous culture and sport'. Therefore, the festival arguably develops social capital by promoting social cohesiveness as 'it's a good binding festival because it brings people together' and promotes 'participation across socio-cultural economic areas and racial barriers'. This social occasion, then, which occurs on a recurring basis, provides an opportunity for members of the community to unite and share a worldview through ethnic, linguistic, historical and cultural bonds (Falassi 1987).

Importantly, respondents also considered the amalgamation of culture and sport as an important feature of the festival because it allowed the Indigenous community

Figure 2: Dance performers on the cultural stage at the 14th Annual Sports and Cultural Festival, Brisbane, 24 November 2007. Photograph Michelle Whitford

to celebrate talents, strengths and uniqueness via a single platform. According to an interview respondent, the festival is 'important because it does promote culture and it is a cultural festival as well as a sporting festival so you know the more cultural dances and cultural performances there are, it becomes really ideal for younger children to watch who don't really learn about their culture'. Nevertheless, for many respondents the sports activities at the festival were considered paramount and, in particular, touch football was viewed as an ideal medium for the festival because it is a low injury contact sport, which provides open participation across age groups, genders and abilities. Interestingly, respondents noted that sporting teams at the festival were generally composed of family members, reiterating the notion that the festival has the capacity to bind society together (Galt 1973) as it is a communal gathering that provides an important occasion for a unique experience in people's social lives (Earls 1993).

The festival further facilitated an opportunity for public celebration, as many interview respondents noted that the festival provided them a sense of 'togetherness and community spirit at a mass gathering of people celebrating our culture and our well being' in an open public space. Importantly, a number of the respondents also believed the community festival was 'a celebration of the community coming together on the one platform, which is sports and culture'. Indeed, interview respondents said that the use of sport was a good mechanism to facilitate Indigenous community celebration, as sport has historically brought the Indigenous community together. Even though the celebration of Indigenous culture was viewed as a key element of the festival, respondents from both the questionnaire and interviews claimed that they also enjoyed the entertainment, the sports games and sportsmanship, the camaraderie, the positive atmosphere and the sense of community togetherness. Importantly, some respondents also believed that because the festival is drug and alcohol free, 'it sets a good example for the community and at the end of the event everyone has enjoyed their time here and have had a good dose of sport and enjoyed the culture and the food'. Moreover, it demonstrated that Indigenous people can have a good time and enjoy sport and culture in a family friendly and safe environment. Overall, the results show that participants came away from the festival with increased knowledge and awareness that the festival is a celebration of cultural events and achievements and this celebratory nature of the festival undoubtedly generated a feeling of goodwill and community or a spirit of 'communitas' (Salamone 2000). Not only did the partici-pants develop kinship and a co-operative spirit at the festival, but they also developed a sense of 'pride and cohesiveness that no economic impact assessment could ever put a dollar value on' (Lee and Taylor 2005:602). While such intangible benefits may be priceless, many of the tangible benefits derived from an event such as the 14th Annual Sport and Cultural Festival can and are allocated a dollar value.

Sporting events are invariably seen as a way to increase economic benefits and revenues for host cities, regions and countries (Lee and Taylor 2005) and can do much to boost tourism in the host destination. Additionally, the economic benefits

Figure 3: Torres Strait Islander dance performers at the 14th Annual Sports and Cultural Festival, Brisbane, 24 November 2007. Photograph Michelle Whitford

of a sporting event are often used to justify public expenditure and costs that accrue from staging an event and/or to secure government sponsorship (Chalip et al. 2003). Overall, the results of this study revealed that the economic impacts of the festival were positive and boosted the local Brisbane economy though increased revenues (Soutar and McLeod 1993; Ritchie 1984; Dwyer et al. 2000). Further, respondents believed the festival contributed to the local community and economy by attracting visitors to the Brisbane region who spent money in local accommodation establishments, businesses and shops. Arguably, local residents surrounding the festival site may hold different viewpoints regarding the festival's impacts. Indeed, the 14th Annual Sports and Cultural Festival generated new expenditure for the Brisbane region through visitor activity and direct expenditure as a result of the festival. Visitors to the Brisbane region comprised around 46% of all attendees and they stayed an average of three nights each while attending the festival. Not surprisingly, then, most of their spending while in the region was on accommodation (39%), meals, food and drink (30%), and transport (21%).

Despite the considerable economic benefits, the majority of interview respondents (88%) did not see the festival as a money-making venture, as it was a free community festival providing sporting competitions, family entertainment and cultural enrichment. Similarly, First Contact Inc. and other key festival stakeholders did not see the festival as a means to generate income, but rather as a tool to support and develop

the community. In fact, overall, respondents felt that the festival should not be focused on income generation for anything other than to cover costs and/or to support the community.

Concomitantly, respondents agreed that the festival was a suitable vehicle for local Indigenous businesses to display and sell their products and/or services to festival attendees. As one interview respondent stated, it was acceptable if 'making money is for Indigenous owned and run small business. To keep and contribute to the Indigenous community and economy. To keep money within Indigenous owned businesses.' Thus the festival was seen as a good way to generate economic benefits for the Indigenous community: 'I believe the stalls allows individuals to trade to make a profit but I believe the stalls are normally managed by Indigenous people and they normally donate back to the First Contact organisation.'

Implications and conclusions

First Contact Inc. and the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival are the result of the entrepreneurial vision of the late Mr Robbie Williams. There has been much discussion pertaining to entrepreneurship and economic development within Indigenous communities (Anderson et al. 2006), highlighting the importance of entrepreneurs in developing business opportunities, sourcing start-up finance and developing partnerships with other business and government and non-government agencies. Certainly, the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival is a vibrant event where new partnerships are being achieved and where new activities and markets are being explored (Neblett and Green 1999). Importantly, the festival remains the responsibility and control of Indigenous peoples and takes into account cultural values and heritage to ensure they are supported by local communities (Fuller et al. 2004).

While an entrepreneurial attitude and approach has been extremely beneficial for the developers of the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival, it may be a more difficult task for other Indigenous communities, especially if the community does not have an entrepreneurial 'spirit' (Matuszewski 1993) such as the late Robbie Williams. Indeed, Robbie could best be described as a community entrepreneur — 'He mentored kids, he knew their families, he gave up his nights and his weekends to help them. When he realised lots of Aboriginal kids weren't playing sport because they didn't have socks and sports shoes, he did something about it' (Judy Spence MP quoted in Wenham 2007). Robbie founded First Contact Inc. with the aim of helping troubled youth and went on to incorporate training, employment and child protection programs into the organisation. Realising the need for sporting and cultural activities in the city, Robbie established the festival in 1992. In 2008 his dedication to the Brisbane community culminated in his election to the Brisbane City Council — the city's first Indigenous councillor. Robbie has been described as a 'man who knew how to walk, talk and work in two worlds — a strong Murri man who got things done' (Tiga Bayles quoted in Wenham 2007).

However, while the individual characteristics and attitudes of an entrepreneur are important, successful entrepreneurship in this instance was not an isolated occurrence, but happened within the social context of a supporting community (MacKenzie 1992:40). In essence, entrepreneurship can be accomplished through a number of methods, including public recognition and promotion of local entrepreneurs and having major industries encourage start-ups through initial contracts, prompt payments and managerial assistance (Matuszewski 1993:62).

Indeed, the identification of new opportunities and the creation of ventures, such as the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival, to exploit new opportunities for the benefit of the entire community require community support for new enterprises. According to Anderson et al. (2006), this process is referred to as 'social entrepreneurialism' and is arguably the primary critical factor identified at the festival as a facilitator of sustainable community development. Social entrepreneurialism distinguishes itself from other forms by emphasising social purpose as the principal driver of the activity, with organisational sustainability as a core objective. The social purpose of the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival has been achieved primarily through entrepreneurship and there has been little, if any, distribution of profit to individuals — any surplus has been reinvested for the long-term benefit of the community. Importantly, it is providing a means to an end, including the creation of social capital, cultural preservation, the creation of wealth and increased capabilities among Indigenous communities (Anderson et al. 2006).

The overarching goal of this research, then, was to produce outcomes that will facilitate both long- and short-term benefits to Indigenous communities. In the short term, increased awareness of the benefits of Indigenous festivals will not only enhance the academic body of knowledge pertaining to Indigenous events, but, more importantly, will assist Indigenous communities and key stakeholders alike in making more informed decisions when they are contemplating developing and hosting an event. For instance, Indigenous communities can utilise the model of the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival and adapt it to smaller-scale festivals for implementation within their own communities by, among other things, emulating the social entrepreneurship displayed by First Contact Inc.

Importantly, underpinning this research was the aim to identify the socio-cultural and economic benefits of an Indigenous festival as they are increasingly becoming recognised components of community development. In the long term, the outcomes of this research may be instrumental in promoting community development by demonstrating the viability and sustainability of festivals. Indeed, the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival will provide benchmark indicators for other Indigenous communities who wish to not only improve their socio-economic self-sufficiency but also identify a platform for the purpose of engagement and celebration in their respective communities.

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